

Mass Effect: Contact

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Summary: In 2560, just years after the end of hostilities between the Earth based UNSC and the New Colonial Alliance, the Industrial colony of Falkland is slowly being turned into a Fortress as a defense against the perceived Colonial threat. But within months of his transfer to the colony, Lance Corporal David Campbell will find out first hand whether or not the fortress will hold.

## 1. Chapter 1

**\*\*UNSC \*\*\_\*\*Red Rover\*\*\_\*\*, Darwin System, February 4, 2560\*\***

With a flash of light and exotic, radioactive, particles, the UNSC \_Red Rover\_ re-entered the normal dimensions of space. As it aligned itself on an intercept trajectory with the second planet from the star, one the two UNSC colony worlds in system, its engines burnt a brilliant blue while smaller thrusters along the bow fired in short, perfectly timed burns to alter the vessels angle of trajectory. Inside the corvettes small cryo-bay, Lance Corporal David Campbell, woke up. Still inside his sealed pod he got a lungful of the frigid cold air. As the curved hatch opened, wisps of fog bellowed out and fell down on to the rubber floor, followed shortly by David himself. Landing on his hands and knees he coughed- violent, wet heaves until the bronchial surfactant oozed out like a long strand of bile.

His cryo training, as short as it was, had done little to prepare him for the gut wrenching feeling and the aches and pains in his joints. He heard the soft slapping of bare feet on the rubberized floor and a small, white towel entered his downward turned field of view.

"Thanks," David coughed. At twenty three David wasn't very old, still a youngster, but having grown up on Earth meant he'd spent most of his time there, not among the colonies.

"You're welcome," a woman's voice, not too much older than his,

replied with a slight laugh. "You Army boys are all the same, can't handle a little cold."

David looked up. Like him the woman was naked, her skin shockingly pale. Short, shoulder length red hair was loose and slightly damp. She had a smooth face, small, flat nose and full lips. A faint, jagged scar that ran across her jaw line told him that she'd seen some action. He took the towel and slowly got to his feet, his knees trembling and his head spinning.

"Molly Tilton, Petty Officer Second Class. Corpsman."

That meant she had rank on him. He gave a salute as he responded. "David Campbell, Lance Corporal, vehicle Operator."

Molly laughed at his response, her eyes crinkled and her cheeks puffed, as she returned his sloppy salute with one equally as sloppy.

"Relax," she said. "I'm not one for formalities."

He quickly got dressed, grabbed his stuff and followed the corpsman to the hanger. As they walked into the hanger, the Petty Officer still mocking him for his lack of coordination and service of choice, he noticed a single SKT-24 shuttlecraft taking up the entirety of the \_Rover\_'s modest hanger. Having entered the ship through its airlock while it was connected to \_Victory's Perch\_, the large wayward station in geosynchronous orbit over Earth, he hadn't known how small the hanger was. Until now.

"About time!" the shuttle's pilot barked as they stepped aboard. "Sit down, strap in and hold tight." The pilot ordered. The shuttle was nearly full, mostly with other Army personal that were, like him, transfers and most looked even younger than him. There were a few other Navel personal sat by the pilot. \_Probably all on shore leave like Tilton. \_David thought.

He stowed his gear; a duffel bag and a Bergen. He sat in one of the few remaining seats. He pulled a U-shaped restraint bar over his shoulders as Molly sat in the seat next him and pretty soon he felt the shuttle lower down through an airlock in the hanger's floor before he felt a kick as the shuttles thrusters engage. Most of the other passengers busied themselves with their COM pads or an old fashioned book- the type his father kept plenty of in their countryside Manor back on Earth, but David found himself wringing his hands and straining his neck to try and get a glance of the colony through the clear partitions of the cockpit's canopy. A variety of greens and blue, tan and white layered the land masses, clear as day through the unpolluted atmosphere of this strange, distant world.

"You ever been to Falkland?" Molly asked, raising her voice so she could be heard over the roar of the shuttles engines. David shook his head.

"Yeah. Haven't really done much traveling. been to Reach and Mars. I honestly never knew this place existed until a couple months ago." David replied. "What about you?"

"Once before, a few years ago now. Back when it was just a Marine

Company stationed here. Now it's an entire Army Division and Marine Battalion. That's not including the Armoured Brigade. I guess HIGHCOM took the NCA threat seriously out here. "

By now the shuttle was entering the Falklands atmosphere and he could see flickering of orange flames creep up from the bottom of the canopy. With a shudder that caused David's teeth to chatter, the shuttles decent smoothed out and the next thing he knew they were darting east, low over the calm, Blue Ocean. In the distance, far on the horizon, through the glare of the early morning sun, he could make out what looked to be city. So small, at the distance they were, the city's towering skyscrapers looked like fine bristles on a toothbrush.

San Carlos Bay was a metropolis. Four towering orbital elevator tethers rose out from the city's massive industrial zone, like golden pillars stretching up to the heavens and beyond. Lines crisscrossed the city, spreading far out into the surrounding mountain range and beyond, heading for the next major population centre. Darting across the lines were the colonies Maglev trains, some carried large cargo containers, filled with a variety of goods to be transported off-world and onto other colonies. Others pulled thinner, more streamlined, passenger carriages, filled with early morning commuters on their way to work.

Nestled neatly in a long, curving, bay, surrounded by the vast mountains of the Lafonia Highlands and built on both sides of the Chartres River, San Carlos covered the entire delta. Newer estates, both industrial and residential, could be seen through the shuttle's canopy as they flew overhead. Partially hidden by the massive trees that lined the mountains a road snaked its way up the steep massifs.

"Wouldn't you? The Alliance is still a threat. There was no formal declaration ending the war. They're just biding their time, regaining their strength." David said. "Plus the Alliance Parliament have been laying claim to this system for years, ever since they declared themselves a sovereign government back in '26. And because, as I understand it, the people here are pro-UNSC it makes sense for HIGHCOM to defend it. It also makes it a target for the Alliance."

The shuttle was following the Chartres River through a wide valley, flanked on either side by the Highland mountains. Minutes later the topography flattened out into a wide, sprawling floodplain and beyond that was a dense forest.

"I guess. Still not a bad place to be if you ask me. It could be worse, you could end up somewhere like Eridnus II or Tribute. Those places are just bad news."

He felt the shuttle slow down and saw the UNSC base he was being stationed at for the first time. It was hard to tell from the angle but he guessed that the base was the size of a small city. Hundreds of buildings, hangers and depots, parade squares and field training areas. Roads ran throughout, connecting everything together and right in front of them was a large airfield, two long runways crossed at their northern ends and a tall control tower overlooked them both. A flight of F-39 Atmospheric Interceptors lined up- ready for take-off. The heat from their exhaust distorted the view behind them and made

the sharp, stealthy angles, of the jets look like a mirage- spectres in the early morning sun. The shuttle slowed and came to a hover and lowered itself onto a designated pad. The small indicator light above the shuttles rear hatch changed from red to green. Outside the air was cold and his breath billowed bone-white. He hadn't expected it to be so cold.

He lined up with the other transfers, most of them Army like him, and waited. They formed three rows of eight. David was at the end, where the Army became Navy. To his left was a younger man, the rank on his collar showed him to be a Private, and to his right was Molly. The shuttle, after it had unloaded its cargo, closed its hatch and lifted off again, back to its parent vessel. Its small, stubby wings looked almost comical on the large, bulbous fuselage as it slowly lifted off; its engines whining loudly.

"Sir, Corporal?" David looked to the private next to him. The small name patch on his breast labeled him as C Taylor.

"Yeah kid?"

"What do we do now? Why are we just stood here?" Taylor asked. Most of the others had started talking to one another, lit up a cigarette and just generally milled about, barely keeping the formation they were in.

"Now we wait," David said with a shrug. During his service on Earth he'd spent plenty of time at different bases. A couple on mainland Europe, three in Asia and two in North America. He'd spent some time on Reach and Mars as well, but not as much as he'd spent on Earth. "Someone will come along and show us where our new accommodation is and then we'll unpack before reporting to our new Commanding Officer."

"I just wish they'd hurry up. It's freezing." The kid replied, shaking his arms and legs to try and keep the blood flowing. David crunched his hands into fists and concentrated on controlling the severe shivers in his arms and legs. He was still sore from his trip in cryo and the frigid air wasn't helping. His joints ached and felt swollen- a common occurrence for people who'd just come out of cryo, a ailment colloquially known as 'freezer burn'.

"You and I both kid but we could be here for a while."

Thankfully they weren't. Half an hour later a Lieutenant, followed by a marine sergeant, walked up to the group and gave a quick introduction.

"Right," the lieutenant said. "I'm Lieutenant Rowkin and this is Staff Sergeant Eton, welcome to Camp Moore. Here's how things work around here; weekends are yours unless you're on exercise or guard duty or told otherwise by your immediate superior. Now, let's show you lot to your accommodation shall we?" Rowkin said. He flicked his head, signalling sergeant Eton forward.

"Marines, Corpsmen," he hollered. "Follow me and we'll get you settled." As he moved off in a fast march, marines in tow, Molly on her way past gave a quick wink and smile which caused him to laugh beneath his breath. Unfortunately for him Rowkin heard and saw everything.

"Don't even think about it trooper. Women like her are all for bone headed marines and you're not a jarhead now are you?"

"No, Sir!" David replied. He struggled to keep the corner of his mouth from curling up into a smile. \_Maybe this won't be so bad. \_He thought. \_Not too bad at all.\_

**\*\*CFM \*\*\_\*\*Iron Heart\*\*\_\*\*, Theta-Crwys System, September 12, 2560\*\***

The \_Iron Heart \_was an older Springhill-class mining vessel. Fifteen hundred meters long and capable of strip mining an asteroid in just a few weeks as well as being capable of supplying enough raw material to build a Destroyer squadron. Old ships like the \_Iron Heart\_ were usually used out in the far reaches of known space, simply because if something went wrong, which was always a possibility, the UNSC wouldn't be losing a multi-billion credit ship that was straight off the production line. Then there was the cost of recovery; it was cheaper to leave an old ship out in space then to mount a rescue on a more modern vessel.

A Springhill-class ship could be described as many things; slow, cumbersome, unreliable. But it was for none of these things that Henry White, Captain of the \_Iron Heart\_, had decided to stay with the old colonial era vessel. He stayed with it because it was familiar to him. Years ago, when he first joined the Colonial Mining Fleet, his first posting was on the \_Iron Heart\_- back when she was fresh off the production line. While he had since served on other ships he took the opportunity to finish his career on the same vessel he started on. He knew his ship. He knew every hum, every vibration in the hull and he knew just how far he could push her before she packed in. Some would say he knew the ship better then he knew his ex-wife.

The view from the bridge was, as always, spectacular. He could see the angled hull sloping off to the side as well as the fourteen large, cylindrical, tanks used to house fuel for the smaller, autonomous, mining bots as well as the ship itself. If needed the tanks could also be used to transport gasses, like deuterium or triamino hydrazine. The Milky Way was brilliant background stipe. Running diagonally across the bridge's curved view port. Stars littered the sky- a billion pinpricks of light scattered throughout.

He moved about the bridge, it was dark, the only light coming from the blue holographic terminals and the reflected light off of the moon they were in orbit over. He looked over the shoulders of the crew as he walked past, looking over their reports as they came in. It would be a while before they were done with their operations in system- another couple of weeks at least but there was no particular rush. The UNSC, and before them the CAA, paid per tonne, not by how quickly you got it. Theta-Crwys was also out of the way- a resource rich system that only a few privately owned vessels would risk going into due to its perilously close proximity to Colonial Alliance space. That and reports of ships going missing in the area certainly weren't helping. Especially when one of the missing ships was, according to rumour, an UNSC scout ship.

"Sir," his ship operations officer called out. "Reports from

engineering; they say our Slip Drive is going to need an overhaul when we get back. The drive core is cracked."

"Thank you Mr Uberti, I'll make a note." Henry said, taking the data pad from the younger man. He sighed. A Shaw-Fujikawa Slipspace Drive was one of the most expensive things on the market. Even though the Iron Heart could only house an older model, due to her fusion generators not being powerful enough to power a newer one, it would still cost a lot of money to get it replaced. 'Maybe it's time to sell the old girl for scrap'\_ He thought sadly. She was, after all, nearly as old as him.

"Ughâ€| Sir? I've got something on the long range scanners. A ship by the looks of it but I don't recognise the design." The sensor officer announced. Suddenly his worries about the Slipspace drive seemed insignificant.

"IFF?" He asked.

"Negative sir. None detected."

"How many?"

"Five, moving in fast, sir." The sensor operator called out, never taking his eyes off the readouts, his hands a flurry of movement over the controls.

"Try hailing them," Henry ordered. After a tense few minutes of silence his communication officer shook his head. No response. That meant whoever was on board had no interest in talking.

"Cancel the mining operations, get everyone back on-board now!" Henry barked. He watched a display showing the unknown vessels getting closer and closer. If they were going to make it out of there it was going to be close. "Spin up the FTL drive. As soon as everyone's back initiate the jump."

"Aye, Captain."

There wasn't much he could now except wait. He watched still as the five yellow triangles on his display closed in on them. With a quick command he switched the view to the external cameras and zoomed in on the approaching ships. They were like none he'd seen before. Long and sleek with wing-like components folded into their side. Their hulls were whitish silver with red stripes painted along the predatory hulls. What was most visible to him the most was positioned along the ships spine. It was Mass Accelerator Cannon. A MAC. While it looked smaller than the ones typically found on UNSC warships it would still be more than enough to tear the Iron Heart asunder- and they were just about to enter weapons range. The hairs on the back of his neck stood at end and he felt a cold lump in his stomach.

"We're ready to jump, sir!" The Navigation officer said. Her hand hovering over the ignition switch.

"Unknown vessels are opening fire, Captain!"

"Do it! Get us out of here!" He called out. In the time it took for the translight engine to open a hole between the normal universe and the extra dimensions of slipstream space, the first slug impacted

along his starboard side. Instead of crashing straight through like he expected the rounds squashed, creating craters in the titanium hull and blowing surrounding sections of hull plating off entirely. Four rounds struck before the full entered Slipspace- one dangerously close to the engineering section of the ship. The ships shook viciously as workstation and power conduits overloaded. The sheer force of the impacts had caused the Iron Heart to list- making it a miracle they even got into Slipspace and stayed there. Fires burned as fuel lines were ruptured and the hull groaned from the stresses being exerted on it. The old titanium hull and TR steel superstructure were never meant to handle the pressures of combat.

But they'd made it, that was the main thing and they were on route to the closest colony world. Except with the damage sustained the old girl was even slower than normal. It would at least a week before they arrived in system. If they made it at all.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN; Okay. It's been a while since I've done anything. I have my reasons and most of them are personal. But I haven't been idle I promise. I just lost my momentum and needed to get it back. It's not as easy as you'd think though. Especially when my previous work was as cringe worthy as it was. <strong>

\*\*So try this one on for size and let me know how it fits. So you know, tell me what you think of this. Also I'd like to point out there is no covenant, the species involved don't exist. Forerunners do but their involvement is off-screen. Any and all advances made by the UNSC are made due to the civil war that erupted. (The one that would of happened if it weren't for the covenant. \*\*

## 2. Chapter 2

\*\*Okay, chapter two. Leave a review to tell me what you think, I can't improve all that much if you don't tell me what's wrong. Don't be afraid to point out errors, (not the plot ones that are undoubtedly there), just don't be an arse about it. \*\*

\*\*There are some characters here that you can help personalise. If you have an idea for them let me know (a PM will do fine).\*\*

\*\*EternalSoldier: Coming from you that is the best thing I've ever seen in my review box ever. Thanks and I hope I don't disappoint.\*\*

\*\*To the guest; I did mention Forerunner involvement was off screen, as in; ONI and the UNSC have been studying Forerunner relics to improve their technology for decades. the civil war was just a catalyst for them to invest in it.\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Falkland, Camp Moore, September 13, 2560<strong>

They'd been on patrol for nearly three hours. Through the shrouded woods and along a wide muddy path with a water filled rut on their

left. The trail twisted and turned through the tall dark black tree trunks. If the lithe alien trees had thicker coverage like oak trees on earth, David doubted he would even be able to see where they were going. They were all carrying a full load of kit- nearly eighty pounds of gear along with their armour, ammo and rifle. Carrying it for so long in freezing cold wasn't easy but it was compared to some of the patrols and marches he'd done during training. The bottom of his dark green camouflage fatigues was stained with mud and was damp allowing a slow, ghostly chill creep up his leg. His boots were caked in thick mud, he couldn't even see his own laces.

\_Just drag 'em through a puddle and that'll wash off the worst of it.\_

They marched on in a staggered line with a ten meter spread between them. David was second in line. He cast a quick look over his shoulders to see the rest of the squad; Sergeant Cohen was in the middle and Taylor, the private he'd met on their first day on the colony, was at the back acting as the rear guard.

There was a \_snap\_ and \_crack\_ of air next him, millimetres from his face, as a round flew by followed almost simultaneously by the bark of an automatic rifle. A tall willowy tree to his right was splattered in red paint from a TTR shot. More rounds followed suit. The point man, Private Andrew-Julien Mann, or AJ as most of the group called him, was hit multiple times. The red paint stained most of his left side and he dropped like a sack of bricks-unconscious.

"Contact!" David called out. "Left side, left side!"

He dove on to his stomach, his belt buckle digging into the ground, and rolled into the water filled rut- it was their only cover. He quick glance to his left let him see the rest of the squad, they'd all made into the ditch with him.

"Form a base line!" Cohen shouted over the roar of automatic weapons fire. A grenade went off behind them; too close for comfort but they managed to form a clean firing line. Corporal Griffiths was next to him, a general purpose machine gun, (GPMG), in hand and laying down suppressive fire.

"Griffiths!" Cohen barked over the SQUADCOM. "Take your section and peel right and flank them. We'll stay here and lay down covering fire."

"Got it," Griffiths replied in his heavily accented colonial brogue. Dirt splashed across his face and shoulders, scattered from a round landing just centimetres from him. More grenades detonated, showering the squad with dirt and mud. David steeled himself to run to the right, being part of Griffiths' section, but he'd be the last to move as he was already on the far right of the group. Taylor ducked low and ran as fast as he could through the water while keeping as low as possible.

As he ran past the corporal he kicked his boot- a signal for him to secure his ammo pouches and run. Someone to his left, Merrick, was hit as he put his head up to return fire, as he fell to the ground, unconscious from the headshot, the person next to him had to make sure he didn't fall in the water and drown. Griffiths ran past him,



kicking his boot as he did so. David did a quick check on ammo pouch making sure they were secure before making a mad dash to meet up with the others in the section.

As they came to a stop he could still hear Cohen and his section battling it out with whoever had been ordered to play the bad guys this time. He came to a stop but there was no incoming fire aimed at them. Whoever was out there hadn't seen them move.

\_Good it'll make it easier.\_

"Campbell, Taylor, Wilkins and Allie, move up from here. Two by two, yeah?" It sounded like a question but over the months David had gotten to know them all and knew that Griffiths was ordering them, not asking them. It was just the way he spoke. "The rest of us will go further right and flank round behind them."

David nodded in confirmation and with the other three in tow he crawled out of the trench and moved to a nearby tree for cover. Taylor was behind him. Allie and Wilkins moved to one to his left. He made a quick motion to the two younger troops indicating for them to move forward while Taylor and he covered them. They moved a hundred meters from the rut like that, a few meters each time two of them moved. By the time they were roughly level with the opposing force some of the fighting had died down.

\_Was the sergeant's section wiped out? Or have the enemy figured out we're flanking them?\_

"Campbell," Griffiths said over the radio. "We're just getting in position now, you ready?"

"Yes, sir." David replied in a low whisper. "Ready and waiting on your go."

A confirmation light blinked in the bottom left of his HUD. He motioned the rest of his fire team to move ahead as one. As quickly as they could without giving themselves away too early they moved closer to the enemy position. Ahead was a fallen tree, its oil black trunk provided cover for a section armed with rifles and a squad automatic weapon, (SAW), they hadn't seen David and his team yet.

"On my go," David said. The others confirmed with an oaky sign.

He lined up the shot, looking down the scope of his MA5D, a small customization he'd made. He aimed at the machine gunners centre mass. \_Always aim for centre mass\_, his instructors had drilled into him the moment they let him near a rifle. He fired.

The gunner went down as did two others who'd been caught out by Allie or Wilkins. Taylor shot off a burst, hitting two guys in the arms. It would hurt them but not take them out of the fight. More shots rang out before the enemy had a chance to return fire. Bullets flew in from behind the enemy position. The rapid fire cracks of Griffiths' GPMG filled the air. Taken by surprise the enemy section was down in a few seconds flat.

"Sergeant Cohen," Griffiths said into the SQUADCOM. There was a brief silence.

"Yeah? You got the bastards?" Cohen's gruff voice answered back over the radio. David couldn't help but let out a small sigh of relief knowing that at the very least the sergeant had made it.

"Yes, sir. Enemy position has been neutralised."

"Good, we're on our way to you now. So who was it?" Griffiths checked over the fallen foes. David got a quick look in and saw who it was.

\_Rowkin. Of course.\_

As Cohen found them, the rest of his section carrying anyone who'd been hit, David set his Bergen down and pulled out a small pad of paper with a tiny pencil wedged into the tight spiral binds at the top. He took down notes about the engagement, everything he'd done before the firefight, what he did during the fight as well as a quick sketch of where the enemy had positioned themselves and the tactics used by the team to counter the ambush. He did it so he could make a more detailed report in his debriefing when they got back to base. By the time he was done it was time to move again. They weren't going to stay in the area just in case Rowkin had another team nearby that might come looking for them and they still had to survive the next three days before the exercise was over. It was going to be a long three days.

It was the dead of night when they marched back through the gates of the base. Falkland's three large moons were partially hidden behind dark clouds. Despite the heavy cloud cover the base was lit by large flood lamps that covered base with bright lights that reminded him of a Rugby stadium during the grand finals. Only there was less noise and celebration.

They were dismissed soon after arriving back with a debriefing at eight the following morning. As David, Taylor, Wilkins and Allie walked back to their rooms in one of the massive multi-story barracks, they passed by a large square filled with armoured vehicles. Grizzly main battle tanks and AS-50 Howitzers were parked in neat rows next to Rhino mobile artillery platforms and Wolverine Anti-Aircraft tanks. Other vehicles were parked nearby as well; M12 Warthogs and M14 Foxhounds were parked into bays of their own. There would be more such vehicles of all classes stored inside the massive motor pool to keep them safe from an unexpected attack. A quick double take revealed that some of the artillery had disappeared. They'd been moved somewhere but there was no scheduled deployments in the coming days that David knew of that would explain it. But it wasn't his place to question.

\_Maybe they've been redeployed somewhere else. Or they've been put on the ranges tomorrow.\_

Neither explanation made sense. Falkland was right on the border with Colonial Alliance held space and was a vital stopping point along the Cygnus-Circinius Shipping route, which made it a strategic waypoint in a war against the Alliance. Why would UNICOM then remove some of the most important assets for a ground war here? Whatever the reason, he guessed the men with stars on their shoulders would know what they were doing.

In the Division headquarters Major General Nicholas Bernard, the commanding officer of all military operations on Falkland, was sat at his desk; a large oak wood piece crafted during the height of the colonial expansion nearly two centuries ago. The dark wood was stained with years of cigar burns and pen scratches. He sat in a leather chair, leaning back with his arms crossed in front of his chest. A decidedly unamused look etched on his withered features. His dark blue-green eyes glared at the younger officer in the room. On the imperial red coloured walls pictures and paintings of previous generals that had commanded the base also seemed to glare at him, equally unamused.

The young officer couldn't help but squirm slightly under the pressure. A bead of sweat ran down the back of his neck before being soaked up by his grey officer slacks. Twenty something and with a full head of dark hair he seemed to wither under the generals glare.

"Are you kidding me, son?" Bernard said eventually. His Meridian drawl was deep and thick, showing his displeasure.

"No, sir," The younger officer replied. "ONI believesâ€|"

"I don't care what ONI believes, boy." Bernard interrupted, slamming his fist on the desk. "You came marching in here at the dead of night telling me about how we were under threat. Now you're telling me it's only a possibility? Which is it, boy?"

"General," he tried again. "ONI is aware of a fleet of unknown vessels massing in the Theta-Crwyys system. Falkland and Victoria are the closest colonies, which puts them at risk. You have to order an evacuation of all the civilians."

"I have to? Last time I checked I don't take orders from a Lieutenant, no matter who he works for and what makes you think these unknown ships are a threat? For all we know it could be an Alliance fleet or some poor alien bastards with no place to call home." Bernard's accent was getting thick and his voice louder.

"The Alliance doesn't have ships that can travel at FTL speed in real space. Nor do they have the manufacturing capability to create a flotilla the size of the entire Eridanus Defence Fleet. And we know they're hostile, sir." The Lieutenant said, matching his gaze with the older mans. "The missing ships? The freighters and cruise liners, all of them destroyed by this fleet without provocation."

Bernard was quiet for a moment. His fingers tapped the desk slowly, like a timer on a bomb counting down to explode. He looked at the younger man with scrutinizing glare. His lips were paper thin, a small white line on an otherwise dark face.

"How exactly do we explain to the forty million people that call this planet home that they need to leave? Better yet how do we get them all off? The answer is we can't!" Bernard glowered at the young man. He had stood up and was leaning over the desk. "If, and it's a pretty bug if, these unknowns come here we'll be ready for them- hostile or not."

"General, FLEETCOM is putting the entire sixteenth fleet together just in case. The risk is just too great. We have to evacuate or at

the very least open up the emergency shelters."

"Look, lieutenant," Bernard said. "We can't. You said it yourself, we can't tell the public just yet but, if we don't then how do we convince them it's for their own safety and not just the UNSC overreacting? It would cause panic in the streets, riots and violence we don't need or want. If war comes to this colony, which has always been a possibility- the reason we are here- then the citizens will have to deal with it the old fashioned way. Hide under their beds and prey."

There was a deathly silence that followed. The only sound in the room was of an antique clock that ticked loudly. The two men were staring each other in the eye, a battle of wills. It was minutes later when the lieutenant finally backed down.

"I have no idea how you made it into Naval Intelligence, son," said Bernard. "You came in here issuing orders and then issued more that contradicted your previous ones. This must be your first outing without a handler. You can't tell me what to do here boy, but you can show me everything you have on these unknowns. And I mean everything."

### 3. Chapter 3

**\*\*Heyup! Chapter 3! You know the drill by now I'm sure. I feel like something is off with this chapter but I can't put my finger on it. \*\***

**\*\*Anyway, let me know what you think!\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>UNSC Scout ship <strong>\_\*\*Mu, \*\*\_\*\*September 13, 2560\*\*

His breath was hot and heavy inside his helmet. The darkened visor did little, however, to protect his eyes from the harsh, white lights that filled the ship.

He rounded another sharp corner. The light grey wall next to him lit up in a shower of sparks as rounds impacted next his head. Metal fragments bounced off his helmet harmlessly. Adrien ducked back into cover. There was at least one of the olive drab coloured aliens at the end, taking cover by a bulkhead.

The alien ship wasn't too big, smaller than a frigate but bigger than a corvette. The hanger his team had boarded through was small, barely large enough to fit the shuttle inside. A few of the aliens had opened fire on them and had killed one of his men. His team proceeded to wipe the defenders out. All that was left now was the bridge. The heart and brain of any vessel. His only problem now, other than the few remaining aliens aboard, was finding it. Unlike Turian ships the bridge wasn't located deep in the heart of the structure, surrounded by armour.

He poked his head round the corner cautiously, another one of the armoured aliens had joined the first, and both had their rifle at the ready. They were talking in their strange language, not as liquid

like as the Asari, nor as sharp as the Turian or as fast as Salarian speech, it was like a mix of all three. One of them fired at him and the other pulled something out of its armour but he didn't see what as he pulled himself back again.

Something hit the wall opposite him and bounced backwards, landing at his feet. Small and round, a little red light flashed rapidly on it. It might have been alien but he knew exactly what it was.

"Grenade!" he shouted. Instinctively he threw himself away from it, into the alien's line of fire. He scrambled to a bulkhead further down, casting a momentary glance behind him as the grenade went off. Two of his men were engulfed in an orange ball of fire and shrapnel. He heard the screaming of at least one more of his men. His shields popped just as he reached some cover. He peered round again, saw the damage done; two bodies lay in pieces, the armour and flesh burnt together and blackened. He motioned one of his soldiers.

\_Overload, now!\_

The trooper reached round and fired an overload from his Omni-tool. It hit one of the aliens dead on, sending non-lethal sparks of electricity through its body, designed to take out shields and weapons for a short period. Unfortunately for him, it did neither. The alien, though confused, still fired. The rounds coming too close for comfort near his head as they zipped by.

He grabbed his own grenade and chucked it. He heard the aliens shout in panic and scramble followed by the dull, \_thump\_ of detonation and then silence. Adrien poked his head round again. Nothing. One of the aliens lay slumped against the wall, its armour charred and shattered. The other was still alive, crawling on its belly, one of its legs missing, the other hanging on by the thread of its uniform.

All he could hear for a moment was his own breathing and his heart thundering in his chest.

He emerged from cover and jogged back to what remained of his team. They were another three men down. Out of the twenty that had come aboard with him, sixteen remained. To Adrien, it was unacceptable losses against a foe that, by all appearances, was inferior to them.

As he walked by, put the alien out of its misery with a simple small burst into its back. He couldn't understand them yet and that one was too far gone to be of any use for interrogation so there was no point keeping it alive and suffering.

Adrien led his team forward, to the front of the ship. Eventually finding the bridge. Inside he found the remainder of the crew. As he breached the thick titanium blast doors he rushed in first. Raising his rifle to his shoulder, aiming reticule up, he jumped through the hole the charges left in the doors. Inside were a dozen of them, all of which had handguns aimed at him, but none fired and neither did he. Curious to see what they'd do next. The rest of Adrien's team piled in, rifles ready. These aliens were different, they lacked the drab armour and instead wore grey cloth that ran from their necks to their feet and their uniform was adorned with gold and silver rank markings he didn't understand. The one with gold braid on his

uniform, the apparent leader, raised a hand and said something to its fellows. They looked at him, some with anger, fright and confusion. Universal emotions shown through the eyes. The leader repeated itself, its voice sterner this time and the alien bridge crew lowered their weapons. He had his team round the heavy looking pistols up and escort the prisoners back down towards the hanger.

Adrien and a corporal stayed on the alien bridge. A large view screen opened up a clear, beautiful, view of the stars. He walked around the command centre in a slow, wide, circle, looking at all the control stations and screens, taking it all in. it was all so\_ alien.\_ It was strange. He served the Turian Hierarchy and by extension the citadel council- a diverse and complex multi-species government that worked to the betterment for dozens of species. It was strange because there were dozens of species and each knew the others quirks. They'd been in contact for centuries or longer. But this was new, completely alien, it was first contact and he was shooting them and capturing their ships. Not the best first impressions, but they had broken citadel law.

\_Can you break a law you don't know about? Was the General too quick to open fire? What would the Primarch say? What would the council say?\_

He tried to stop thinking down that line. Turian's didn't question orders. Lieutenants didn't question Generals. Plus, it was too late now. They'd committed to this action. These aliens would be put down and made into a client race. They certainly had a knack for space travel. Adrien had heard about how the massive dreadnought sized ship had escaped a scouting flotilla by means of a \_portal.\_ The commander had been adamant about that. They didn't use element zero. They didn't use Mass Effect technology. They used portals. He didn't believe the rumours until this ship- the one he'd just captured- had dropped out of one almost right next to the cruiser he was stationed aboard.

He walked over to the command chair in the centre of the bridge and decided to try it out. He liked it. A lot. He could see every station and command over them and he had access to a command station as well as an unobstructed view into space. Unfortunately his peace was ruined by the arrival of tech teams sent over to scour through the ship databases and see what they could get from it. He doubted it would be much, if anything.

Before leaving the alien ship he looked round again from the command seat and noted small holographic projectors next every station with one on a plinth next to the commander's chair. He wondered what they were for. A VI perhaps. Or communications with other ship captains and officers. He didn't know. It was too \_alien\_ to guess.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Falkland, Camp Moore, September 19, 2560<strong>

"â€|\_and in other news, three more freighters have been declared missing in the Shanxi sector. UNSC Naval forces are mobilising to find out what happened to the missing ships."\_

David snapped the radio off as he finished zipping his coat up. This

afternoon was his and he planned on spending it in the city. He had a date. He grabbed his chatter and keyset from his desk, a small wooden piece that barely fitted in his room. It was cluttered with a mass of holo-stills, three-dimensional pictures of his life. His graduation from school, him in his full dress uniform at his passing out parade and one him and his two older sisters playing on a grassy knoll in a park close to the house his grandparents lived in. He'd only been about four or five at the time and the rugby ball he had looked huge compared to him. Rugby had always been his favourite sport.

He cast a quick glance at the holographic clock on his wall, surrounded by posters of topless models, sports cars and an England Rugby Team poster, signed by the entire team of that year. He checked himself over one last time in the mirror hanging on the front of his wardrobe before he left his room, the automatic door locking behind him with a \_swish \_and \_thunk.\_

He was using an old civilian version of the M12 Warthog, the only difference was it was enclosed and lacked the menacing tusks on the tow bar. He hopped into the large, rusted orange coloured, truck and keyed the engine. He grinned at the sound of the twelve-litre engine growling into life. It wasn't the same as the roar of his own sports car on Earth; an early twenty-first century V-12 machine that had cost him nearly everything he was worth. But it still brought him some satisfaction. He whacked the heater on full as he pulled the all-wheel drive four-by-four out of its parking spot and onto a road that would take him to the main gate. His route took him past the air field and he got a full view of it. Coming in on the shuttle he'd missed the large circular pads that reached deep underground to the main vehicle hanger bay where a full complement of Pelican drop ships, UH-144 and UH-142 Falcons and AV-22 Sparrowhawk gunships.

During the war Camp Moore had been turned into a massive staging area, a command centre for military operations in the area. What he saw now was just the remnants of that operation. But its former glory was being returned slowly but surely as more and more troops were arriving at an almost weekly basis. Two destroyers and a light carrier were in orbit as well, for how long he didn't know but it was somewhat comforting to know there was some form of orbital support should they need it. But as he pulled the borrowed truck onto the main highway a few miles from the base and let the road ware system drive him to the city, he doubted the need for so many men. It seemed, in his opinion, daft. There were multiple bushfire wars going on in the colonies, caused by the massive cultural differences of the people in the colonies. Having nearly twenty thousand soldiers here seemed like a waste.

The main highway took him alongside the river. The traffic was moderate he thought, more than he expected but less than the highways on Earth. A massive truck blew past him, sounding its horn as it did so. In the valley the tall mountains blocked the sun, casting the highway into shadow. The surrounding countryside slowly began to transform from river banks grass fields into a developing residential zone. He passed by an incomplete estate and a primary school which was just finishing for the day. Kids ran up to their parents as they charged out of the school doors in a stampede of tiny bodies, grubby faces and brightly coloured backpacks.

Eventually though the low walls, family sized houses and corner

stores slowly turned into towers that got bigger and bigger until they dominated the skyline.

Soon enough he pulled into a car park and walked the rest of the way to his destination; a small sidewalk café that overlooked the long beach at the north end of town. His date, or more specifically \_liaison\_, was yet to arrive. He grabbed a cup of coffee from the automated dispenser, its voice reminded him of the typical waitress of a New Jersey diner from the old movies in his collection.

He took residence in a seat by the window that allowed him to see over the beach and towards the sea. It was a clear day today and about as warm as it got on the colony, and the people were enjoying it while they could; brightly coloured sail boats and motorboats danced across the cold grey looking water. A pelican sat on standby at the edge of a long, wooden, pier. It's red and white hull bore the symbol of the coast guard.

It was ten minutes before she showed up. He put his chatter down as she walked in, she was more interesting than the news. She grabbed herself a coffee for herself before joining him at the table and they shared pleasantries.

"This is nice," she said. "Small, out the way, not bad coffee."

"I think it's quaint. Plus the chances of anyone we know coming here and finding us are slim. Which is what we agreed upon, isn't it Molly?" Molly laughed.

"True, we don't want Rowkin to find out that his favourite NCO is screwing a Navy girl."

"Well, I wouldn't have called myself his favourite, but essentially, yes. You know what he's like. He'd report it General Bernard and we'd both get put up for it." He enjoyed the time he spent with her, but he loved his career, he didn't want to take too many chances with it. She leaned forward and said in a whisper.

"True, that's why I got us room in a small hotel tonight. What time do you have to back on base?"

He couldn't help himself, he laughed. It was like a classic affair, meeting in a discrete hotel, doing the deed, and being back home in time for supper.

"What? What's so funny about that?" Molly asked, looking almost hurt.

"Nothing, nothing," said David. "Just thought it was a bit funny, you know? Sneaking around, meeting in café's and hotels. It's like we're having an affair, keeping it a secret from our loving spouses." She laughed a little at that.

"When you put it that way then yeah, it is a little funny," she said. "But it's for a reason."

"I know. I get that. Now, let's just enjoy the day, 'eh?" David said, taking a swig from his drink. "How was the stint on Victoria?"



"Boring," she replied with a shrug. Her short, shoulder length hair- way over the regulation length- bobbed every time she moved her head, "It's full of miners and machines. The closest thing to civilization on that rock was the base camp. And it's colder there than it is here. Absolutely horrible place, damn NCA can have it for all I care."

"Sounds like a whale of a time. At least you didn't have Rowkin try to shoot you dozens of times over three days."

"He's a bastard."

"He's an officer from the colonies. He just has a thing against Earth, not enough of one to become a rebel or join the NCA but still, he hates our beautiful home world. Don't know why." David replied with a shrug.

They sat in silence for short while. David was about to ask what else she had planned for the afternoon and evening when a short, high pitched, ringing cut through the air. It was her chatter. With an apologetic smile she ducked off to answer it and when she came back several minutes later, the look on her face was not good.

"I've got to go, a damaged mining ship just jumped into orbit and needs help so the marines are being called in. They also want medical aid hence why I'm going." She said, quickly gathering her things. He tried to ignore the stabbing feeling of resentment.

"Its fine," he forced out. "I understand. We're soldiers, duty comes first."

"I don't know how long this'll take so, don't hold your breath okay?" She said before turning for the door and nearly running out the door. He sighed and shrugged.

\_That could have gone better. And a whole lot worse, so overall; not too bad. I've got the rest of the day off, and night. What am I going to do with myself? Screw it, I'll ring the lads, they know the best clubs around here.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>HSV <strong>\_\*\*Abiding Truth, \*\*\_\*\*Turian Dreadnought, uncharted space, 2156 CE\*\*

The alien captain sat on a lone chair in the middle of the room, strapped down by its feet and wrists. It had been stripped of its grey and gold uniform and instead wore a plain white shirt that covered its chest but not its arms. It still had the grey slacks on its legs and polished shoes on its feet. For a prisoner, it looked surprisingly calm.

The Turian general entered the room, flanked by the lieutenant that had captured the alien command crew and a guard. Desolas Arterius, a veteran of multiple conflicts throughout council space and a notorious leader known for his preference of action over words, said nothing as he circled the captive like a shark circling its prey. The alien captain just watched through narrowed eyes.

It was a while before Desolas spoke. Calm and smooth, like verbal

silk, he spoke with confidence and authority. Something the translator did well to express.

"Do you understand me?" he asked. The captive gave no verbal indication but a light rise of its eyebrow gave it away. It was surprised. "You and your crew are now prisoners of the Turian hierarchy and, as such, we are within our rights to treat you as deemed necessary." Desolas paused for a second, letting it sink in.

"Now, if you cooperate, actions that might seemâ€¦| \_unsavoury \_will be avoided. And if you don't we'll make sure you do in the future." He said. "So, first of all, what's your name and rank? You're obviously military, even if it is a primitive military."

"Captain, William D, 098564-47514-WD, commanding officer of the UNSC scout ship \_Mu." \_

"Interesting. Well, Captain, you're off to a good start. Now, what is your species called? How many worlds does your government have and where is the position of your home world?" Desolas asked. He stood to the captain's right, Adrien to the captain's left. The young Turian lieutenant was watching his superior as he worked.

"Humans, that's my people's collective name. Homo sapiens, if you want the proper name. I won't tell you how many worlds we control nor will I tell you the location of our home world. And before you ask, I won't give up military secrets either." The human captain sneered. Baring his small, white teeth, Adrien could only see four sharp, predatory like fangs in his mouth, suggesting that humans, like the Asari, were omnivores. Something that would fascinate biologists throughout the galaxy but also revealed even more about this, so far, unknown species.

"How very admirable of you. But really it is a pointless and trivial exercise, denying me the information I requested." Desolas activated his Omni-tool, his forearm glowing orange as it surrounded itself with a holographic display. A small projection appeared above his wrist. A planet, islands dotted the surface, four space elevators reached out from the surface. A colony for sure, but which? It could have been any of them. Even a navy captain didn't know what every colony looked like. It could even belong to the New Colonial Alliance.

"A scout ship of mine located this just hours ago. Well developed, large population and if the scans are as accurate as I'm sure they are, a large military population as well. You see, \_captain,\_ the last few questions were merely a test to see your honesty while answering and to see how cooperative you'd be. Perhaps one of your subordinates will be more willing to help. They might stop what you failed to do; stop the invasion of your precious little world."

With that the Turian General turned and went to leave, only stopping long enough to order the guard to take the prisoner back to the brig. The lieutenant stayed. He looked at the captain, trying to figure out the human and vice versa. Eventually though he left, shaking his head and sighing. Then the guard took the captain back to a small cell located somewhere near the ship's engineering section.

Adrien Victus, studied the human weapons. Both of them taken from the

captured ship. They were primitive, using chemical reactions to propel the bullet. A digital display showed the amount of rounds left in the weapons magazine, currently zero in its unloaded state, and a tactical lamp was fastened underneath the barrel. The side arm was similar, bulky and unwieldy in his three fingered grip.

They were strange, alien, primitive and highly effective. He'd learnt that one the hard way. An overload won't stop them firing and due to their very nature aren't stopped by the standard issue kinetic barrier. A chilling thought. It meant one of his most advantageous pieces of equipment on the battlefield was rendered moot simply by the difference in technology. Irony at its best; more advanced by being less advanced. When this confrontation between people comes to a head, as it is bound to, the Turian losses would be colossal. Unacceptable. Catastrophic. He could stop it though, before it all went too far. He had a friend, one friend located at the heart of the galactic commerce, the centre of civilization and cooperation; the citadel.

He could inform his friend, let him know and warn the council of the impending conflict they could step in and stop it all. His hands hovered over his holographic keyboard, ready to type the message, but he couldn't. The Turian within him. The pride within him, wouldn't allow it. Turians always won. No matter the odds. He sighed, letting his hands fall to his desk. Maybe the human leaders would be smart enough to surrender, like the command crew. Maybe.

#### 4. Chapter 4

\*\*A/N; Update! Well, I have reasons, like getting myself a new job, for not updating, but here we go. Another chapter to the story, hope you all enjoy it and you know, leave a review to let me know what you thought. \*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Falkland orbit, UNSC Pelican Echo-420, 2560<strong>

The first images of the damaged mining vessel came in over the screens in the troop bay of the pelican. Its large, bulky hull looked like a child's toy in the distance, but as they got closer even she could see the damage. The massive engine assembly- a large, bulky mass of fuel lines, coolant pipes and exposed circuitry- was twisted and melted by the extreme heat of the alien mass driver round. There was more damage along the starboard side. Impact craters uncovered the delicate inner workings of the massive mining vessel.

The marines didn't seem fazed at all. Their expression was stoic, their eyes forward, their weapons ready. There was only a small squad of them. The rest of the personal were corpsmen, trained to heal people rather than kill them. Although they could easily do both. Molly caught a quick glimpse of the emblem on the marines shoulder; an upwards facing dagger. They weren't just marines, they were Commandos to boot. It would explain the lack of chatter and banter. They were like any other marines, tough and reliable but they did an extra eighteen weeks of training, focused on fighting on a platoon or squad level against a numerically superior foe or deep behind enemy lines. The only marines with more bragging rights were the infamous ODSs. Why they were being sent along was a mystery. Surely they had

more urgent matters than a simple aid mission to a civilian ship.

The leader, Sergeant Oman, was around the same height as her and was well built. His arms and legs were thick and full of muscle and his face looked nice, almost fatherly. Instead of the white and red helmet that everyone else wore, the Sergeant wore a simple green beret. Molly recognised the badge only thanks to David's endless talk about historic military units and how they were represented in the modern armed forces. And instead of the typical, standard issue combat knife, the commandos all had a Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife, a dagger nearly a foot long and as identifiable as the badge or beret.

The pelican touched down in the main hanger bay. A small group of miners were there to see them in and as the ramp lowered itself the commandos hopped out first, rifles ready but not up. Mining equipment was strewn about, rushed in and not secured for a FTL jump due to their hasty exit. A brief thought entered her mind;\_ how many people were left behind?\_

The chief mining engineer, his status shown through the red stripes on the arms and legs of his dust coloured uniform, stepped forward from the small crowd in the hanger. He was tall, as tall as David, his stomach bulged out and hung over his belt, hiding the custom, gold plated buckle. His uniform was stained with oil, grease and other, unidentifiable substances.

"Thank god you're here," he said. "Our med bay wasn't designed for the amount of people that are in there and we only have one doctor on board."

"It's okay, sir," Oman said. He motioned the medical personal forward. "Have someone show them to the med bay." The Sergeant watched as Molly and the rest of the corpsmen were showed out of the hanger.

"What about you?" she head the chief engineer ask.

"You're going to take me to the bridge, to see the Captain."

She didn't hear the rest of the talk, nor did she see them move out towards the bridge. They were led through the empty dark passageways of the ship until they reached the medical bay, carrying all the equipment they could. Inside was the smell of burnt flesh and blood and death. Crewmembers were packed into the small bay and anyone who had even the slightest amount of first aid training was in there, trying to help their shipmates. They got to work. The sight of men and women coughing up their own lungs because of their exposure to the harsh reality of space when the hull was breached was horrifying, even to her and she'd seen men and women torn in half by IEDs planted by NCA forces during the war. Members of the engineering crew were covered in third degree burns and were screaming. Those that were silent were either already dead or had passed out.

They were at it for hours. Going back and forth between the crew. The more serious cases were put on the pelican and transported to a proper hospital and the dead were wheeled off to be placed into the shipboard cryo-tubes but they managed to help the crew. Most of them would have died without their assistance, and those that were still

on their feet were thankful for saving the lives of their buddy's.

Molly sat down in the small designated break room and rubbed her eyes to ward off the tiredness of the day. Most of the exhaustion was mental rather than physical; it had been years since she'd seen that many injuries all in one place. She was determined to help people though, it's what got her through situations like that. Her desire to help was the reason she became a corpsman rather than a civilian doctor. The UNSC helped those that needed it out in the harsh and unforgiving expanse. She sat in an aluminium chair next to a table in the corner and put her feet up on the chair opposite. She closed her eyes with the intention of grabbing what sleep she could, who knew just when she would get another chance.

The alarm blared. A shrill ringing erupted throughout the ship and red emergency lights snapped on and Molly nearly fell out the rec room chair in her rush to get up. How long had she been asleep? Ten minutes? An hour? It didn't matter. What mattered was finding out what happened. She only made it to the door before the marine Sergeant's voice echoed over the ship's intercom.

"All hands abandon ship, I say again; all hands abandon ship!" he ordered. "We have confirmed hostile contacts on approach." That answered what was happening. She ran with the crowd- a mix of crew and medics as they went for the closest escape pods.

'\_What about the people still in the infirmary? They'll need all the help they can get.'\_

She tried to turn against the crowd, a near impossible feat as she was pushed and shoved along into an even bigger mass of people. It was loud, the sound of so many people moving and worrying about the situation almost toned out the alarms. It took her five minutes to fight her way to the med bay where she found the staff wheeling out the patients that couldn't walk and escorting those that could. Still, an extra body wouldn't hurt.

"Molly, Molly!" someone shouted over the crowd. She looked around, trying to find the source until a hand clamped down on her shoulder. It made her jump. The situation was getting to her nerves. They were nearly to the escape pods though, it would be over for her soon.

"Goddamn girl, relax, okay? We need you at the back, there's a few stragglers, we just need help making sure they get to the pods, okay?" Before she could even turn round the speaker was gone. She recognised the voice, a good friend in the corps, but she couldn't see her. Once again, with time pressing against her, she pushed against the crowd. How much time did they have before the hostile contacts were on them? Would they attempt to board the ship? She had her sidearm, but that wouldn't do much good against a mass driver slug if the enemy ships decided to blow the \_Iron Heart\_ into a million pieces. The injured crowd filtered out and the stragglers were few and far between. She hesitated, casting a quick look over her shoulder in the direction of the escape pods and then back towards the med bay. Did she save herself? Or did she go back for anyone that might still be trailing behind? It wasn't really much of a choice. She went back on herself. The corridors were empty, the red emergency lighting cast a crimson hue on everything, making it look

like a scene from a horror vid.

The infirmary was empty and she'd seen no one else. With barely a seconds hesitation she turned to leave. The sooner she was off the ship the better. As she hurried through the now abandoned passageways she felt the floor beneath her rumble; it wasn't the same as the vibrations from the engines as they moved the multi-thousand tonne vessel, but the violent shaking of a ship under fire. Molly more doubled her pace, desperate to make it to an escape pod before the ship was ripped apart and she was cast into the freezing emptiness of space. Past the final corner was a dozen people all trying to cram into the last pod in the area. The entire ship shook violently, throwing her and the others to the floor. The alarms went silent and power conduits exploded, causing the lights to cut out, plunging them all into a thin red mist of the emergency lighting. The metal bulkheads groaned and screeched as they struggled to hold together as the ship was torn apart by the enemy kinetic rounds. In just seconds the situation had gone from bad to worse and everyone was scrabbling for a place on the pod, even her.

There was a loud, soul crunching shriek of metal before the room around her exploded. The passageway was split in two near the far end and the air blasted out in a deafening roar. The air in her lungs was forced out- leaving her breathless and in agony as her body was ripped apart on the inside from the force of its expulsion. She, along with everyone else, was blustered out into the abyss, their bodies drifted away, ignored by the hostile alien fleet as they moved in on the two colonies.

**\*\*UNSC Camp Moor, Command and Control Centre, Falkland 2560\*\***

As soon as the alien fleet arrived in system the base had been on high alert. Inside the command bunker, a series of tunnels and rooms located half a mile under the base, General Bernard and his staff began planning on what course of action to take if the aliens started landing troops on Falkland. Bernard stood watching over the chart table, a three-dimensional representation of orbit that was so finely detailed he could see the bodies of men and women that had still been on board the Iron Heart when the alien fleet tore it to pieces. A few of them had IFF tags on them, soldiers he'd sent up there to help out the damaged craft.

The chart was lidar imaging combined with real-time data from orbital cameras and sensors. It allowed him and his staff to see everything the enemy fleet did and react to it before the aliens knew it. Around him was a hive of activity; men and women, enlisted and officers, worked to organise troops and armour for the inevitable attack. The only thing they were all left wondering was where the aliens would land. It could be anywhere; from the frozen poles to the small archipelago islands a thousand miles from the coast where they wouldn't immediately be harassed by UNSC defences. Or would they land in the cities? Make a push straight for the major population centres? It all depended on what the enemy goals were. And even the best sensors couldn't predict a completely alien threat.

"I told you general, the colony is at risk," Bernard didn't give the blonde ONI officer a sideways glance.

"Well, let's just hope the information ONI gathered is just as reliable then," the old general said in reply. The officer looked at

him and waited. Bernard had already organised his artillery and armour into the hills surrounding Camp Moore and San Carlos Bay and recalled all troops back to camp. There wasn't much more he could do until the aliens made their move.

It wasn't long before they made it.

## 5. Chapter 5

"\_It is with the heaviest of hearts that I bring you this news; just hours ago I was informed by UNSC High Command that one of our Inner Colonies was attacked and had been since invaded by an enemy who has given no warning and with no provocation. These invaders are not, by all reports, the New Colonial Alliance, but are, in fact, a new and dangerous alien species. We have made first contact, and they have invaded our land! Attacked a sovereign nation with no provocation, warning or attempt at a diplomatic solution. But I promise you this, the men and women of the UNSC will beat back these aggressors and we will push them back to the brink where they will surrender, or face destruction! Our goal now is simple; victory, for without it, there is no survival."\_\_\*\*- \*\*\_\*\*George F. Warren, President of the UEG\*\*

\*\*San Carlos Bay, Falkland, 2560\*\*

It had been two days since the aliens arrived. In two days the aliens had taken everything apart from Camp Moore and San Carlos Bay, the two most heavily defended places on Falkland. General Bernard had placed every soldier on Falkland into a defensive perimeter around the city and Camp. David was stationed along the main highway into San Carlos. His job was simple; watch for any movement by the aliens and to accept any civilians that had escaped the hostile advance and instruct them where to go.

They were scared. The civilians, and soldiers, no one knew what to expect from these hostile creatures. Would they just charge the city, confident in their own superiority? Or would they be smart, use tactics and turn the ground war into a bloody fight. From the few reports that made it back from the now occupied land, far from San Carlos, it would be the latter. He couldn't blame the civilians for being scared, many were hiding in the massive underground emergency shelters to hide out the coming storm but others stayed in their homes, living as much of a normal life as they could.

David looked out over the bay, only just visible from his position on the other side of the city. Even so, through the building and bridges he saw the angular remains of the alien ship that had tried, and failed, to take the city. One of the few pieces of plasma artillery, a modified version of the Rhino, had torn it in half as it lowered itself. Now one of the sharp wing-like structures that adorned the ships flanks stuck up out of the harbour and during low tide most of the burnt, cracked hull was also visible. It had slowed the aliens down, but it hadn't stopped them indefinitely.

From the platoons position- a checkpoint on the main highway- they had a good line of sight on most approaches to the city, including the Maglev train lines. The number of incoming trains had slowed down and now, the lines were empty. So was the road, the long highway reached far out into the distance and over the horizon, being crested

on the hill as they were, allowed David and the rest of the platoon even greater line of sight, but it was empty. It was strange, and demoralising to know that so few had made it to the relative safety of Camp Moore and San Carlos.

There were rumours floating about the ranks, though. Ones that provided an inkling of hope. Not only was the UNSC 16th Fleet amassing to come and relieve them, but a scheduled patrol was due in system today. While a standard patrol wouldn't be able to take on the entire alien fleet, it could drop down extra supplies and provide cover for any evacuation attempt. But mere foot soldiers like him wouldn't know about such plans.

He was currently manning the gun on the Foxhound- an up-armoured variant of the Warthog that allowed for greater protection for the troops inside at the loss of its anti-air capability. Instead atop its armoured roof was a M247T Machine gun and mounted on the side of the .50 calibre was an automatic grenade launcher to help suppress hostiles behind solid cover. He scanned the horizon, allowing the gun muzzle to list across it. Taylor was stood next to him on the road, his back against the vehicle and his rifle on the ground next to him. The younger man was muttering the lyrics to a song, either out of boredom or for the comfort the familiar words gave.

"You okay, Taylor?" David asked.

"Yeah, just nervous. Those scaly basterds could attack any moment, just like they did at Stanley," he replied, looking up at David.

"I think we're okay here," David replied. "Command would tell us if the enemy were moving towards us. Besides, Stanley was different, we didn't have troops over there."

"I guess," Taylor said with a shrug. "I just don't like all the waiting around. If something's going to happen, let it happen. Fuck waiting around for two days while innocent people die."

"Ninety percent of war is waiting, Taylor. Get used to it, mate."

There was a sudden burst of chatter on the radio, Corporal Griffiths was listening intently. He looked up to the sky above the city, past the clear blue sky. David turned to follow his gaze, as did the rest of the platoon. There was a flash above the glistening towers, then another and another. Streaks of fire rained down on the city, anti-air rockets blasted out from the mountains, taking out a quarter of them. The rest made landfall, impacting the sides of skyscrapers or landing in the roads and in shopping plazas. After a few seconds the sound of heavy impacts hit the checkpoint.

"Did those basterds just bomb the city?" someone asked, David wasn't sure who.

"No," Griffiths said gruffly. "Those were drop pods. Shock troops. They dropped ODSTs."

There was silence from the mostly inexperienced troops. ODSTs were the UNSCs special warfare division and shock troops. Chances were that to the aliens ODSTs meant the same. If the aliens were dropping in shock troops then the army would have to be quick to respond, the



local police department would be torn to shreds.

An emergency signal flashed onto his HUD and a panicked voice all but wailed into the radio. The sound of gunfire echoed in the background along with the terrified screams of civilians as they ran from the aliens.

"\_They're inside the city! SWAT is being torn apart-"\_ a sudden explosion erupted over the radio before the static filled the coms.

"Mount up!" Rowkin shouted. "We're heading into the city!"

And so they did. David put Wilkins on the gun while he sat next to Taylor, who was driving. Allie, the youngest member of his fire team sat in the back.

"\_Campbell, you guys are on point,"\_ Rowkin said over the radio as they all buckled in and as Taylor brought the engine roaring into life. "\_New orders from command; we're heading to the Parliament Building, we've got VIPs still there. Including the Governor."\_

"You heard him, Taylor. We get to hit all the alien landmines first."

"Oh joy, because \_that's\_ what I wanted to do when I signed up."

"Exactly, now gun it, kid."

In the back Allie took off her helmet and ran a pale hand through her short dark hair. Looking over his shoulder he noticed that she looked pale, more so than normal.

"You okay, Allie?" David asked.

"We really going to fight these guys? I mean they've got an entire fleet overhead, they outnumber us by who knows how many, how are we meant to fight them?" she said. Her voice cracked.

"Well, I don't see us get off Falkland without having fired some bullets at these twats. Our only hope is to keep them occupied until the 16th arrives." He replied. "Look, we'll pick up the VIPs and then sit tight somewhere safe until the whole thing blows over."

"You sure?"

"As sure as I can be." David said before turning back to face the front. It would be his job to navigate Taylor through the quickest route.

XX

\*\*202\*\*\*\*nd\*\*\*\* Shock Infantry, HSV \*\*\_\*\*Imperial Eclipse,  
\*\*\_\*\*2153\*\*

It was silent, at first. The start of an orbital insertion always was. There was no air resistance to shake the pods and no sound from outside. The small view port built into the drop pods allowed the operator to see what was around him or her, and to allow them to see

their landing point as they neared it.

The view outside changed from the pitch black of the launch tube to the deep black of space, millions of stars shone in the distance and the hue of a nebula created an incredible vista that would give poets and artists something to dwell on for years. His pod had been launched from the \_Imperial Eclipse,\_ one of the two dreadnoughts assigned to the mission by Naval Command back on Palaven. The \_Eclipse \_held a position 'above' the fleet and as such on his decent the majestic, predatory shapes of the Hierarchy's most powerful warships seemed to float by him. Starlight from the native sun caught on the ablative armour of a cruiser and it glistened. It was a sight he wanted to remember for the rest of his life. It added to the image of the unstoppable fleet and the rightness of the cause, no matter the flaws in said cause.

Before too long his insertion pod shook and flames, caused by the heat of entry into the planet's atmosphere, started to lick at the bottom of his view port. He wasn't alone in his assault- all of Alpha Company was with him, a hundred and twenty men and women of the 202nd fell with him. The fire around his pod died as the ground beneath him became more detailed.

The ground shifted from a flat, two-dimensional image into a detailed panorama of the city and surrounding terrain. The flat green of the planet gained detail, vast mountains rose up and deep valley's sunk down and the dark grey of urban sprawl grew from a speck to a vast metropolis with towering glass and steel structures.

An alarm blared in his ear and plumes of fire and smoke rocketed out from the surrounding mountains. Before his commanding officer could issue any orders for the company to scatter a hypersonic missile crashed into his pod, turning it, and his CO, into a scattering of molten debris. By the time his pod impacted the ground in the middle of a large, terraced plaza over a quarter of the company had been taken out. Lieutenant Victus jumped from his pod as the hatch blew open, looking up he saw another pod hit the side of a building before it tumbled to the ground out of control. It landed in a street round the corner, whoever had been in there didn't make it out.

Human civilians ran away in fright at the sight of the heavily armoured turian and as gunfire erupted somewhere close by. The aliens were already responding far quicker than command had anticipated. Adrien halted a moment, his orders were to secure a beachhead for the main invasion force inside the city- he wasn't going to shoot civilians unless they got in his way. The briefing had shown a large open area surrounding a moderately sized building roughly a kilometre from his current position. That was his objective- to capture that location and hold it until reinforcements arrived.

He took off towards the platoons RV point, a pre-planned position he had marked out to his men before they dropped so they could all meet up. There was a certain safety in numbers. Especially behind enemy lines. He ducked into a side alley and ran. He sprinted through the alley, across the road on the far side, hopped a small knee high wall and slid down an artificial embankment onto a deserted highway. Multi-coloured cars of various shapes and sizes lay abandoned, their engines still running and doors left wide open. He followed the road north, sticking close to the abandoned vehicles, using them as cover. He reached a junction, one that would allow him to reach the RV

point. The ramp he wanted was blocked, the remains of an interceptor lay in a burning wreck. The Turian inside was dead. Adrien cursed, the road carried on, under the overpass but it was blocked by heavy blast doors, that meant he would have to go over the other side and then across the bridge, completely exposed, to get where he wanted to be.

As he crossed the exposed bridge he heard the chop of blades through the air and the ground around him suddenly exploded. Adrien cursed and ran for cover before the gunner found his mark. He leapt over the front of a dark red vehicle that looked thick enough to provide cover against the gunship. He peeked his head up and levelled his rifle at his aerial attacker as it circled back around; it had a two rotors one atop the other, it had two stubby wings sticking out the side armed with rockets and missiles and the nose mounted gun blended in against the dull grey coloured hull. Adrien fired of a short burst of rifle fire, the hyper-sonic, sand-grain sized rounds hit the canopy but the ballistic glass remained strong; he'd barely scratched it. The gun let loose another torrent of fire, the vehicle was torn to shreds, forcing Adrien to make another run for it.

The asphalt beneath his feet was chewed up and blasted into dust. In the chaos he tripped on something, his rifle skidded across the road and underneath a sleek, black car. His shield cracked and popped as a round hit his shoulder. A rocket burst forth from somewhere nearby, then another, the first veered off and up to the right as the gunship evaded and launched a blinding array of flares and chaff to disrupt the guidance system on the rockets, while the second missile stayed true and smashed into the hull beneath the canopy. It crashed down in a blaze of metal and fire onto the highway below.

Adrien stood up slowly, wincing as his shoulder stung and throbbed with pain. The armour on his shoulder was cracked and broken, nothing more than dead weight now. He recovered his rifle as his rescuer walked toward him, rocket launcher in his hands. It was his second in command, Sergeant Vyrnnus, a smug young man from one of the colonies.

"Another second there and you'd be as dead as the Rachni, Lieutenant," Vyrnnus said cockily. "We thought you might have gotten blown up on the way down here."

"Thanks," Adrien replied as he walked up to his subordinate. "How many others made it?"

Vyrnnus shrugged. "Just over a dozen."

"Dammit!" Adrien cursed. Over half his platoon hadn't made it to the RV point. How much of the company was left? The plan had been bold, risky even, and without support from troops already groundside, outside the city, it was doomed. But, like a good turian, he had his orders.

He followed Vyrnnus back to where what remained of his platoon was laying low as the battle for the city raged around them. Above an aerial battle was unfolding- interceptors and fighters duked it out with their human equivalents. Adrien couldn't tell who was winning yet. His men looked fine, barley a scratch between them.

"Listen up, men," Adrien said. Bringing their attention to him as he

moved into the centre of the group, hidden away inside the remains of an office foyer. "Second and third platoons are creating a diversion in the heart of the city, with the goal of capturing the police headquarters here. Failing that they'll extract and link up with us and first platoon in our goal for what command believes is the main government building on this world. Our objective, after linking up with first platoon will be to capture this building and to hold it at all costs until reinforcements land."

"What about enemy strength around the AO?" someone asked.

"Minimal, but drones are reporting a light armoured column moving that way. Hopefully most of the first platoon will have made it because we're going to need as many hands on deck as possible if that column reaches the target first."

"Got it," the soldier replied.

"Good. Men, move out!"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Hope you liked it. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask. I'll message you back if you've got an account. If not I'll be sure to answer you in the next chapter.<strong>

\*\*Dragonheart, I hear you, hopefully it shows a little in this chapter.\*\*

## 6. Chapter 6

The armoured vehicles sped through the streets, weaving in and out of the abandoned cars and trucks that remained where they were left, doors open and engines running. David paid the forgotten vehicles no notice, instead keeping his eyes open, watching the building and sky for any alien activity. There was none that concerned him all the way to the parliament building. Although alien fighters and UNSC interceptors danced about the sky in wide, crisscrossing arcs and filled the sky with fire and tracers, feathered plumes of smoke illuminated the sky, and city, in a brilliant display of firepower and engineering and raw skill of the pilots that flew.

It was strange to see the beauty of a clear blue sky be tarnished by the bitter struggle between two opposing factions. The old vids of aerial dogfights during the Second World War were always a grainy black and white and failed to portray the clear skies required to fly centuries prior. The parliament building was surrounded by a low wall topped with an iron fence where a large black iron gate protected the only way in or out of the government compound. They were sealed shut, forcing them to ram the gates with the Foxhound, the iron twisted and broke, the gate split open as the vehicle roared through the screeching metal, the massive wheels slid as they fought for grip in the loose gravel, throwing up small rocks and dirt as the multi-ton machines of war powered through.

The Taylor pulled the vehicle into a skidding stop parallel to the main doors, near two squad cars that had been hit by an alien missile or bomb. Wilkins and the other men and women manning the guns on the

armoured convoy stayed put, keeping their guns focused on the driveway and the gate they'd just broken through. Taylor stayed with vehicle while David and Allie ran up the small lot of steps and stacked up on the door. Lieutenant Rowkin and Sergeant Cohen ran up to them, followed by a few others from the platoon, the rest stayed with the vehicles.

Rowkin motioned for Cohen to knock on the thick doors, the heavy thumps echoed in the room beyond and David could hear the sound of something being moved. A moment later one of the doors opened up, revealing a nervous young constable from the local police, his uniform was covered in dirt but otherwise fine, they had avoided the action so far.

"Oh thank god," the young man said in relief. "When I heard the gate smash I feared the worst. Half of us don't even have weapons and when the cars were taken out we tried to radio out but we weren't sure if the message got through."

Rowkin pushed past the constable, looking around the main hall, and headed for the small crowd of people in expensive looking suits. Other police officers milled about, unsure of what was happening. Cohen escorted the young policeman to one side to explain the situation and get as much information as possible from the frightened man.

"Why didn't they evacuate the governor when the aliens first arrived in the system? Surely it would have been safer and we wouldn't be stuck doing it now in the middle of an invasion." Allie whispered to David.

"Politics," David replied simply. "They have an image to maintain, they thought that by staying here during the worst of it would keep their popularity up after the fight. Of course as soon as there was any real danger they come running scared."

They moved closer to Rowkin and the group of politicians and governors. Keeping an eye on the surroundings. It seemed silly, David thought, to check for alien activity in the secure location but he really didn't want to get shot in the back while somewhere that should have been safe. He really didn't want to risk it.

The lieutenant was discussing who would go where in the convoy; most of them, the governor included, would be escorted back to Camp Moore in the armoured personnel carrier, APC, while the rest would be carried in any remaining seats in the Bulldogs. As there was a spare seat with him the Minister of Education ended up being volunteered. She was a small woman on the far end of middle aged and with slight streaks of grey in her otherwise impressive dark red hair. She was wearing a simple pantsuit that was the same creamy colour of her skin, somehow she looked immaculate, as if there was no battle raging round them, intensifying every second. She looked David over once, then Allie and frowned but said nothing.

"Ma'am," David said courteously. "I'm Lance Corporal Campbell, this is Private Allison Green. You'll be riding with us."

"I see, let's just hope the day stays uneventful." She said. Her voice betrayed just how scared and tired she was. They didn't waste time milling about and Rowkin quickly began herding people out

towards the waiting armoured vehicles.

\* \* \*

><p>They moved towards the walls of the compound, out of sight from the defenders. They were outnumbered and outgunned, the native aliens had several armoured vehicles equipped with heavy machine guns that could very well rip through the entire platoon if they weren't careful.<p>

Part of the wall and iron railing had collapsed, caused by the constant shaking of the ground- a result of heavy artillery and orbital bombardment. Adrien watched as a trio of alien fighters raced overhead, darted between the buildings and released a bombs onto or near second platoon. Overhead the sky darkened as the atmosphere condensed beneath the superstructures of turian frigates and cruisers, their massive bulk providing some cover to aerial units. It wasn't long before the aliens struck at the ships, plasma artillery from the hills lanced up and scorched the cruisers, burning and ripping through the armour plating and tearing a ship in half. The drive core exploded, overloaded by the intensity of the plasma, which turned vaporized the two halves. The cracked reactor leaked element zero into the skies as a fine purple haze. Wreckage from the ships rained down, crashing into the skyscrapers and buildings below. The bow of a frigate landed in the river, sending waves upstream. It was difficult to see such a sight.

Support guns on the underside of a surviving cruiser opened up on the hills, turning them all into giant plumes of earth and rock. Missiles responded, most were intercepted by the defence systems aboard the ships, some made it through. The kinetic barriers flared up, stopping the weapons metres from the hull. The shaped explosives however, designed to penetrate metres of armour, ripped chunks of armour off and pierced decks, killing any crewmen nearby.

Adrien forced eyes away from the hell braking loose above the city. He couldn't do anything about it, nothing except offer prayers for the men and women lost. That, and avenge them. He took out his sniper rifle and had another one of his men do the same. They hadn't been seen yet but he wasn't willing to push his luck. The defences around the last city was ferocious and people on both sides were being killed in the hundreds every minute. And this was just a colony, what would the defence of their home be like? A hundred, if not thousand times worse.

Adrien took aim at a young, pink skinned human manning a machine gun on the vehicle furthest to the right. The other sniper did the same with another target. Adrien slowed his breathing, and fired. His subordinate did the same. The human on the gun dropped, blood gushing from the wound to his face and neck. The next few seconds past by in a haze of motion, blurred and hectic.

The humans shouted and returned fire, machine guns ripped through the wall and peppered them with bullets and debris. Most of the rounds missed and those that did connect were deflected by his kinetic barriers, the other sniper wasn't so lucky; a hailstorm of armour-piercing bullets ripped into him, depleted his barrier and turned him into chunks of flesh and armour. Adrien was covered in a fine mist of blue blood from his fallen comrade.

The remains of his platoon, most of which had failed to make it groundside, fell back away from the collapsed segment, moving towards the broken gate. Vyrnnus was on point there, rocket launcher out and at the ready.

"Take out what you can," Adrien shouted over the cacophony of gunfire. A grenade exploded behind them, where they had been previously, then another before the gunfire stopped. Vyrnnus peaked round and fired. Adrien heard the explosion and muffled cries of agony and anger. Bullets poured in around Vyrnnus, tracers ricocheted off of his barrier and into the dirt. A grenade followed, engulfing Vyrnnus and an unlucky soldier. Both disappeared in a ball of fire and shrapnel, body parts were catapulted through the air in every direction, they all ducked for cover in the once neat flowerbeds that lined the wall. There were more cries and revving of engines as the armoured cars began to move, their wheels spinning in the loose stones as they fought for purchase.

The ten surviving members of his platoon, stayed down as the vehicles roared through the gate, running over a chunk of Vyrnnus in the process before proceeding down the road at high speed. He called it in, an armoured escort had just rushed past him, retreating rather than engage the small force, indicating they had something important to protect. As the last armoured vehicle disappeared from sight he motioned for them to move into the compound.

The remains of one of the smaller armoured cars was a smouldering wreck, a wheel was missing and part of the side facing him was missing, exposing the insides where half a human lay and a charred husk sat, slouched in the driver's seat. Two more bodies, one of which was in lighter, blue coloured, armour with human writing on it. Shrapnel had taken half his face off, leaving him in a pool of blood and brain matter. It wasn't pretty. The other half of the gunner from the destroyed vehicle lay nearby. They'd done more damage to the humans, Adrien realised. Only because they retreated, he reminded himself.

The ground shook as the surviving cruiser fired on targets in the hills around the city, the impacts creating massive craters, damaging the local environment almost beyond repair. Part of him cringed, knowing the Council would look down on such tactics but the soldier in him knew it was the easiest way to remove the artillery that had taken down four frigates and two cruisers. An act that inflicted massive damage on the city's infrastructure.

They cleared the building, looking for anyone left behind and finding none.

"Command," Adrien said into his radio. He was in the main office, used by the leader of the colony for his day to day running of the planet. "Location secured, General."

"\_Good work, Lieutenant. Support will be arriving momentarily."\_

Adrien let out a sigh of relief. Turians may have been one of the most disciplined military forces in the galaxy but that didn't mean they liked war. It was dirty, nasty and gruesome. Especially for frontline troops like him. The sooner the fighting was over the better.

**\*\*HSV \*\*\_\*\*Imperial Eclipse\*\*\_**

Generals Desolas Arterius and Tereus Absis stood conferring at the heart of the massive dreadnought. Between them was a holographic table displaying the human city and its surrounding countryside, including the large military complex.

"What's the status of the ground forces currently deployed?" asked Absis.

"They're down by over half their strength," Desolas replied with an irritated huff. "If we don't take the city soon we won't have the manpower to do so."

"What about the forces deployed in other part of the planet?"

"They're on route to assault the military base, they're going to time their attack after our main assault, when the majority of the soldiers are in the city, leaving a token garrison in the base itself." Desolas said, indicating the markers for the ground troops mentioned. The three arrows marked the three different assault points on the base, hitting it from every direction.

"And the underground facilities?" Absis asked, showing the massive underground complexes under the city and base. The one under the base was almost definitely the command and control centre for all the military operations on the planet. The ones under the city could have been anything from fallout shelter for the citizens or underground munitions depots. Or both. There was another, under the city, above the massive complexes but spread out and with massive power expenditure, almost impossible to distinguish from the city itself.

Desolas, and some forces on the ground who'd been forced into the outer tunnels surrounding it, believed it to be a massive data archive, containing important information about the humans they were fighting. Some very valuable knowledge.

"Ground teams will sweep the base, fight their way down into the lowest levels to clear out any humans hiding in there. As for the city I've got a team, led by Victus after his commander was killed, that I can have slip into the archive and download as much as he can, either before he's discovered, or got it all."

"Good," Absis said. "We'll have to pull the ships back into orbit soon, they're taking a beating down there and we've got a massive storm coming in."

"How big?"

"Very, it'll cease all air operations over the city and reduce temperatures to near zero. Wind speed will be nearing a hundred and thirty miles per hour, operations on the ground will be severely limited. Your team better get moving if they want to be underground when the storm hits."

"Right," Desolas muttered. "I'll send the word. If you'll excuse me I've got an invasion to lead." With a nod from his fellow flag



officer Desolas left the CIC of the *Eclipse*, heading for the hanger bay. The crew was almost silent as they carried out their duties, only speaking up when coordinating something with another station officer.

Absis watched as the massive hurricane slowly edged closer to the continent. By nightfall the outer edges would be visible from the shore. By this time tomorrow the entire operations area would be caught up in insane winds and near freezing temperatures- conditions that turians were, naturally, adverse to. The humans had the advantage there, Absis knew, having looked over what little data they'd attained about the human home world; Earth. All he knew was its name and some environmental conditions, not exactly important but they helped him understand his enemy a little better. They were more suited to varying degrees of temperature, he gauged. It was possible that humans had only developed in a small part of their planet and then expanded but it was unlikely.

Before he could carry on in his musings and alarm rung out, red combat lighting lit up the CIC and the crew came alive, calling out to each other to figure out what was happening.

"Status?" he barked over the commotion. The officers quietened down and there was a brief second before someone answered.

"A frigate flotilla called in an anomaly on the outer edges of the system before their signal dropped off the grid. We've got another flotilla on route now, it'll be a few minutes before they have a visual." His senior communications officer reported.

"Patch me through the lead ship of the flotilla," Absis ordered. There was a second delay as the communications station patched the general's personal com system to the light cruiser leading the flotilla.

"This is Captain Bartis of the *Sharpened Claw*, we hear you General." The voice of cruisers captain echoed through the CIC. "We are approaching the coordinates now."

"What do you see, captain?" Absis asked. He folded one arm across his chest and grabbed his chin with other hand and began pacing around the combat operations table.

"Sensors?" Bartis asked. There was another moment of silence. "Three contacts; two medium cruisers and one heavy cruiser. They're coming about, battle stations!"

The next several minutes were agonising, listening in as the captain engaged the enemy. The flotilla had only just opened fire when the human ships destroyed three ships on the flotilla. More ships winked out of existence on the combat operations table, the display of which had changed from the planet to star system, showing the position of the turian fleet and now the three human ships.

"Captain, what's the status of the enemy ship?"

"They have shields, unlike the vessels we encountered before. One of the medium cruiser's shields are nearly depleted." Absis was stunned. They had shields? Without the use of element zero and mass effect fields, shields were thought to be impossible, or too power

hungry to be efficient. Apparently not.

This tour was teaching the old turian general things that should have been either impossible or too costly to be effective.

The battle raged for several more minutes before all three human ships disappeared. Bartis claimed they escaped into the strange portal used by human ships. Minutes later, as the fleet was preparing to stand down, the human ships reappeared over the planet, placing themselves between the fleet and colony. The two lighter ships dropped down and performed a risky aero braking manoeuvre over the city, releasing a swarm of transports and drop pods into the city before they moved off.

The heaviest of the three took pot shots at the main turian fleet, unable to return fire without risking a stray shot hitting the planet below. When the two ships re-joined it they moved off, out of the planets gravity well before vanishing into the FTL portals they used. Absis cursed, annoyed that at the cost of a flotilla and three ships from another had caused only moderate damage to the ships. Granted the human ships didn't stay to fight, a fight they would have lost, but they were on the defensive, looking only to resupply their forces on the ground with extra troops and munitions.

It also told him something else. The human counterattack was coming-soon. He would need to reorganise his fleet and send a request back to Palaven for more ships, to resist the counterattack and hopefully disable the majority of the human fleet in the process.

**\*\*Codex Entry- Human- UNSC Colonies- Falkland- Camp Moore\*\***

Originally the colony of Falkland, settled in the yearly days of the colonial golden age, had no military presence. In the late 2300's with the onset of the Inner Colony Wars, as it was latter dubbed, Falkland, a major industrial colony and stopping point on the territory wide shipping route, was given a massive military presence.

The massive underground complex beneath Camp Moore was designed to house and shelter the ten thousand of UNSC military personnel stationed there in the event of a nuclear attack by another colony. Such an attack never came and the complex slowly fell out of use, only to be revived a hundred and fifty years later, during the much larger conflict in the Outer Colonies, led by the New Colonial Alliance against the Earth based UNSC.

During the later stages of the civil war Camp Moore was downsized yet again, to free up personnel and materials in more important areas of combat. After the war, with tensions between the NCA and UNSC nearing boiling point, the garrison at Falkland was increased, just in time for the Turian invasion.

## 7. Chapter 7

**\*\*Station Omega- UNSC Naval Anchorage, Sector Indigo Three- Sixteenth Fleet Rally Point, 2560\*\***

Station Omega was a massive deep space anchorage for fleets operating

in the Outer Colonies but it rarely saw an entire fleet amassed, ready for war. Docked with one of the large docking ports was the fleet's flagship, the first, and last dreadnought in service; the UNSC \_Vanguard.\_ The \_Vanguard \_was massive, almost as large as a supercarrier and armed with enough firepower to take on a battlegroup it was a force to be reckoned with. It was the dreadnoughts massive size, massive cost to replace and threat that had made them a target in the war with the Outer Colonies.

While a few survived the war they were scrapped soon after to save money, their parts and thick armour removed and placed on newer ships in the fleet. The \_Vanguard \_was an aging vessel, tell-tale signs exhibited themselves to anyone; her engine baffles were blackened and the armour had several large dents and scratches, nothing to threaten hull integrity, but noticeable. There was also her design, thick, bulky hull plating and the octagonal, angular shape, whereas newer, modern ships were sleeker, deadlier.

Omega station was a shaped like, ironically, the symbol of omega. With massive docking arms and internal bays for smaller craft as well as enough space to house the hundreds of people serving on the station and crews of docked ships. The station orbited an ice moon which itself orbited a Jovian sized gas giant, the only planet of particular note in the star system. Deep in the bowels of the station, inside a cramped room, big enough for a desk and computer terminal with little elbow room.

Admiral Erwin Indara sat, hunched over the desk looking at the terminal as the face of Fleet Admiral Hood came up on the screen. He could have done this from the comfort of his cabin on the \_Vanguard \_but instead he'd chosen to use the small office belonging to the Rear Admiral in charge of the station. Obviously Mayson, the Rear Admiral in charge, didn't think he'd be posted to the station long, the lack of personal decorations made it clear enough.

The reason he'd chosen to make the call on the station and rather than his ship was that the call was meant to private. The \_Vanguard\_'s AI, George, was, like all of the veraciously intelligent 'smart' AIs, absolutely brilliant. And like other 'smart' AIs he inherited some traits of his human donor, including the ability to run his mouth. During the final days of the war, just after he was commissioned, George had held himself like an admiral, issuing orders and operating the fleet with a precision and drive not unlike Indara's own. He'd also presented himself as such. But after the war the AI, growing older, started to become increasingly eccentric. During the few engagements they'd seen since George reverted back to the old, admiral of the fleet he did so well.

"\_Hood here,"\_ Lord Hood looked and sounded tired. A quick check of the time revealed it was just past one in the morning at the HIGHCOM facility on Reach. Despite the late time Lord Hood was still in uniform and still in his office. Behind him Indara could see the skyline of New Alexandria, lit up against the night. "\_I take it your fleet is ready, Admiral." \_Hood said, it wasn't a question, merely a statement.

"Yes, sir it is. We'll be underway in less than an hour." Indara said. Lord Hood seemed thoughtful a moment.

"\_Are you sure?"\_

"Yes, sir."

"\_About what you're going to do? You make the wrong move here and you could very well start a war the UNSC might not be able to win."\_

"I understand that, sir," Indara said, confused by Lord Hood's hesitation to give the order. "But we have people on the ground, millions of innocent people that don't deserve to be left under the subjugation of these aliens. And they won't stay at Falkland, sir. They know we're here, they won't stop now unless we beat them back. Once we get them out of our territory then we can try and negotiate with them." Lord Hood just nodded silently.

"\_The president agrees with you, he wants the aliens ousted from Falkland as soon as possible. Then, hopefully we can open negotiations with them— if they're willing."\_ It was a big 'if'.  
\_"You have a go, Admiral. Take back our world, once you've regained control over Falkland the First Fleet will join you. Once they arrive you are to push the aliens back out of UNSC space. Do NOT follow them beyond that line."\_

"Understood, sir." Lord Hood disconnected the call a moment later. Indara stood up from the small desk, stretched his back until he heard and felt the satisfying crack of vertebrae, and left. He made sure to stop by the large command centre to thank admiral Mayson. He had his back to the room, looking out the viewport to see the amassed fleet gathering nearby. It looked like a sea of titanium battle plate, illuminated by the gentle blue glow of the engines and the distant glow of the star at the centre of the system, out of sight.

He took a moment to take it in before thanking Mayson for letting him use his office, and then taking his leave. Indara walked through the narrow corridors and causeways, junior officers and enlisted men and women moved aside, snapping off awkward salutes as he passed by, returning the gesture. Some off duty personnel also passed him by, on their way to one of the many recreational areas several decks above. When he reached the gangway that led to the \_Vanguard\_ he was greeted by two heavily armed marines that snapped off smart salutes as he passed them before following him aboard.

He gave the order as soon as he entered the bridge and moments later he felt the entire ship lurch as the magnetic docking clamps disengaged and manoeuvring thrusters pushed the ship back far enough away from the station for it to safely activate its main thrusters. It was the familiar rumbling in the decks as the engines kicked in, the slight heave as they began to move forward, the nauseating feeling of vertigo as she rolled so she wasn't upside down relative to the rest of the fleet, which put the smallest hints of a smile on his face.

"Admiral, all ships are ready to transition into slipstream space on your mark," the helmsman said from the navigations console, one of two dozen consoles used to command and coordinate the entire fleet.

"Coordinate with the fleet, have battlegroup \_Basra\_ immerse first, followed by battlegroup \_Gibraltar\_ on the starboard flank and battlegroup \_Lancer\_ on the port side. Have battlegroups \_Kursk\_ and

\_Midway\_ appear above and below us respectively." Indara ordered. George appeared next Indara's command chair, his holographic form was one of a highly decorated admiral, not unlike Lord Hood.

"That old trick, admiral? Are you sure you want to try that?" George asked. Having served on the \_Vanguard\_ for six years, the AI had been the only constant in the crew other than Indara and had seen the admiral use the same tactic to smash an NCA fleet, twice the size of his own, into shreds.

"It's not like they've seen us do it before, George," Indara replied quietly.

"True," George admitted, lowering his holographic head in a gesture of submission. "But the alien fleet might be too wide spread for the attack to be effective."

"Then we'll adjust." Indara said confidently. As they were conversing the fleet repositioned itself into the formations ordered before they started transitioning into the eleven nondimensions 'above' the one temporal and three spatial dimensions of normal space one by one. \_Basra\_ was first, as ordered, the heavy cruiser was followed by the rest of the ships in the battlegroup, a dozen destroyers and twice that many frigates.

Seconds later the \_Vanguard\_ followed suite, escorted by its permanent escort of fifteen heavy destroyers, a cruiser and an Orion-class carrier. There was a strange sensation that echoed in his body, reverberating through his bones as they entered non-Euclidian and non-Einsteinian space, like a small wave of static energy moved throughout his body, as if enticed by the sudden change in the laws of physics. Different people reacted to slip space travel differently, some would barely notice a thing, others would get strange sensations, like Indara did, and others could get extremely sick. It was rare to see people who reacted that badly to Slipspace travel, usually they were drummed out of service or stuck behind a desk.

"All ships are in transit and holding course, admiral. ETA; eighty two hours." The helmsman said, looking over his shoulder to look at the admiral directly. That was a long time; over three days before they arrived to help the beleaguered men and women stuck on the ground, trapped and surrounded by an enemy they didn't really know how to fight. They'd spent too much time getting the fleet together, spent too much time waiting while an outnumbered garrison tried to fight off the inevitable.

"So why the secrecy?" Captain Peter Coombs, Indara's first officer and the captain of the \_Vanguard\_, asked quietly. They stood next to one another, leaning on the brass railing that separated the main command stations from the rest of the bridge stations below.

"Keep moral up. You know what George is like, I guess Lord Hood knew to and didn't want him to accidentally let it slip that this could end very badly for us. Didn't want that pressure on the green crew." Indara said with a slight shrug.

"You know he can hear us, right?" Coombs said in whisper still. His eyebrow was raised inquisitively.

"I know, and I trust him to keep his mouth shut long enough for it to not be a problem." Indara said with a smile. Neither one of them said anything for a moment, content with watching the crew work. Ignoring the quiet banter between the crew as they worked.

"I'll never understand you and that AI, sir." Coombs said after a while. Indara had served with Coombs long enough to know the man meant no disrespect by the comment, but still it hurt a little knowing he was the only member of the crew to know and trust the AI as much as he did.

Although it made sense really, most of the crew moved on, transferred to another ship or station, rarely staying for more than one extended tour. Only a few members stayed faithful to the ageing dreadnought. Then again young crewman and officers, fresh out of UCMB or OCS, were vying for positions on cruisers, destroyers and carriers, not an old, outdated ship class like the Vanguard.

"I was here when they brought him online, and when he's decommissioned I'll be here." Indara said simply.

"Speaking of which, what's going to happen when-"

"The ship will be decommissioned; docked at Victory's Perch over Earth and turned into a damned museum." Indara interrupted the question. The date was already on his calendar, a date set in stone. The date he'd finally retire. Whether or not he'd see that date depended on the outcome of the next few weeks. Not just the battles ahead but the attempts at diplomacy. The actions he took from now on could very well have drastic effects on humanity as a whole- not exactly something he wanted to be thinking about right then.

## 8. Chapter 8

**\*\*San Carolos Bay, 2560, \*\***

**\*\*Sixteenth Fleet's ETA: Eighty one hours,\*\***

David was not a trained medic but he did his best. When the gunfire erupted outside the parliament building he rushed out, unceremoniously shoving the middle aged politician into the back of the Foxhound, she didn't protest; too frightened by the gunfire, the chance of death, to say anything. The back of the Foxhound was cramped at the best of time, with one person manning the gun two fully armoured soldiers could fit in the back seats with only a slight squeeze. With three of them David could barely move his arms.

Wilkins had been hit. He found out when he all but through the Minister of Education into the back. Over the loud cracks of gunfire and explosions he'd missed the call that there was a man down. Now, as the Taylor did his best get them towards Camp Moore, weaving in and out of abandoned cars and large chunks of debris from the alien ships at high speed, David did his best to stabilise the twenty year old man whose neck was torn open, spurting blood all over the inside of the truck.

Lee Wilkins was, as far as David knew, still unmarried and left behind family to serve on what was supposed to be a simple rotation

to a colony- devoid of any combat and bloodshed. Their mere presence was a deterrent to the NCA who simply didn't have the numbers or capabilities to capture the planet. Yet here he was; clinging onto his life by a mere thread in the back of an armoured vehicle as it rushed to evacuate a VIP. The first thing David tried was to stop the bleeding, stop the jets of blood squirting up and covering them both, by shoving his hand over the gaping wound that had grazed the younger man's neck, while he fumbled about, trying to get at the biofoam canister out of the small pouch on his hip. The constant swerving and bouncing kept throwing him off balance, taking the pressure off the wound on Wilkins neck.

David, when he first arrived on Falkland, thought he'd seen a fair amount in life; the run down town he'd called home had been host to numerous fights and stabbings, the homeless and junkies were a common sight. When he'd enlisted he'd partaken in riot training, later putting it the training to use over a year ago in Geneva when protests against the UNSC for not reducing its military presence, and spending, turned violent. How it happened David never found out, just that it did. But right now he realised something; he watching a man, a friend die. He was doing his best to stop that from happening but a part of him, in the back of his mind, knew it was too late. He realised this even as he applied the biofoam and self-adhesive gauze.

He'd been too slow; Wilkins had stopped moving, one of his hands was loosely holding David's wrist, the strength in it gone, along with the life in his eyes. Now they just stared past him, looking into oblivion and beyond. It was a chilling sight. Allie looked back at him from the front seat to see him perched awkwardly with one knee on the seat while his other leg was stretched out, his boot pressing against the joint between the gunner's stand and driver's seat. He was covered in blood, not head to toe but there was a lot of it. He was panting, out of breath, tired and emotionally drained.

"Main route is blocked," Allie said. He could barely hear her over the roar of the engine, the hurried, panicked radio chatter and the blood pumping in his ears. The whole world seemed to slow down as he started to lose his connection to it. "Sirâ€| Dave, where do we go?"

He didn't reply, he couldn't hear her over the sounds in his head; the gunshot, the shouting, the gurgling noise as Wilkins died in front of him. Then there was no sound. Just a shallow emptiness and guilt. He'd put Wilkins in the position he was in when he was shot, therefore it was David's fault.

"Dave!" Taylor shouted, his concentration the road ahead of them. He was quickly running out of ideas on where to go and the lieutenant was little help over the radio. A quick glance in the side mirrors showed the convoy, and more importantly the APC carrying the governor was still there. "Come on, man, we need a way out of here! Where are we going?"

Taylor was good, a capable driver that knew the streets of San Carlos well enough to get them back to base after a night in the city, but he'd always used the same route. He'd never bothered looking up an alternate. He'd never needed one before. Now the damage to city caused by the fighting had caused the city's superintendent AI to seal off large parts of the city- massive blast doors five metres

thick sealed off major access ways, leaving him to try and find a side road that would allow them to either bypass the gates or find another way out of the city.

The panic in his voice seemed to bring David back to reality.

"Greenman Street, there's a slip road onto the main thoroughfare, we should be able to get to the Fenchurch street on the riverside from there!" David replied. His voice lacked the usual accented enthusiasm it normally carried. A little thing Allie picked up on and it frightened her. Out of all of them David seemed to remain unfazed no matter what. Until now.

When Allison had first met David Campbell she'd been fascinated with the man. He was average in height and looks but his distinctly earthen accent made him sound anything but average. He always had a story or piece of information ready for every occasion, usually related to the conversations the fire team had regularly, but not always. Being born and raised on Bliss, a small colony on the fringes of human space, Allison only left the colony world for her training on Reach. The small farm she had called home up until last year was exactly that; small. Her parents had were only just getting by and Allison had no intention of staying there. She wanted to see the stars, visit countless worlds and explore the completely alien planets. And then there was Earth. While most colonials had very little interest in Earth, unless it was business, she had been fascinated with the planet that had given birth to humanity.

There was so much history there it was incredible. Something she wanted to go see first-hand one day. So when David had told her he was from Earth she became fascinated, asking all sorts of questions until he finally told her to shut her mouth.

Since then, through countless exercises in the field and nights out in the city she'd learnt how much he really didn't care about most things. Politics made him threaten to shoot you and most sports popular in the colonies made his eyes glaze over in boredom. Then there were the things she'd learnt he was passionate about, sports back on Earth, classic cars and other, more aloof topics. Like the philosophical debates about the colonial secession and rise of the NCA; the inevitability of war with the colonies. He wasn't a genius or anything- just cultured. Well versed in human society. Something that caught most people off guard; the fact that he had only visited two colonies before Falkland led people to think he was biased towards Earth. Allison found out it couldn't further from the truth. He wasn't biased at all. He didn't care where you were from, as long as you were a decent enough person.

So when she turned around in the Foxhound to ask him what to do, to see a look of disassociation with the world around him, and fear and confusion, she struggled not to panic. Even when he gathered his wits enough to speak up, he seemed distant. Cold. Afraid.

She was so wound up in her thoughts Allison nearly didn't notice the silhouette of a gunship bearing down on their position as barrelled down the main thoroughfare. She had caught a glimpse of it in the side mirror, lining itself up with the convoy.

"Chris!" she shouted, using Taylor's given name. "Gunship, right



behind us!"

"Christ, god damn it!" He cursed, swerving round a chunk of alien armour from the ships overhead and into the inside lane, the furthest lane away from the slip roads. An explosion behind them rocked the suspension, the back end began to slip out before Taylor quickly brought it back inline. Over the radio David heard Lieutenant Rowkin order them to scatter.

"There!" David said, pointing over Taylor's shoulder towards the closest off ramp. Taylor veered aggressively towards it, scraping along the side of a SUV which, a second later became a flaming ball of fire and supersonic shrapnel that scratched and pierced parts of the Foxhound's armour. The shockwave lifted the back wheels of the ground for a second and when they reconnected with the synthetic polycrrete of the road David was thrown up against the roof before crumpling into an awkward heap in the foot well behind Taylor. Wilkins body landed on top of him and he heard the minister grunt in surprise. Everything was happening so fast David only caught a brief glimpse of the woman and she looked terrified. Rightfully so. Aliens were trying to kill them.

He felt the Foxhound surge up the off ramp at full speed as he struggled to get up from the foot well. A rocket detonated somewhere behind them, not aimed at them but one of the other vehicles in the convoy. He had no idea whether or not the rocket had hit its mark. The gunships anti-tank gun fired at them again as they reached the apex of the slip road, the Foxhound was launched into the air and into a roll. It was all a blur then broken up by patches of blackness. The Foxhound landed on its driver side headlight, crumpling the armour, before it flipped and rolled over the street, crashing over a sleek coupe and into the glass and steel lobby of a building where it came to a rest on its roof.

David struggled to move, everything hurt. There was a sharp, stinging pain in his leg and arms. He could hear the muffled voices of Allie and Taylor and the minister. But they were distant, far away. He felt the heavy shroud of consciousness begin to slip away, blackness crept into his vision before it took over completely, then the voices stopped.

## 9. Chapter 9

\*\*Earth, UEG Capitol Building, New York, URNA, September 20, 2560\*\*

\*\*One hour until the President's announcement of the alien invasion of Falkland\*\*

Chancellor Adam Hewitt ignored the small video display tuned into the Waypoint news channel as it detailed yet another private ship going missing in the Shanxi sector. Another one of nearly a dozen now. The reporter was throwing out theories about the disappearances, but the chancellor wasn't listening, instead he busied himself with his work.

Outside his office grey rain clouds loomed and a steady patter of rain impacting the large window that dominated the wall behind his desk seemed to echo throughout his office. In the end he gave up on

the idea of getting anymore work done after he read the same paragraph for five minutes.

He knew why he was distracted from his work. The disappearances Shanxi was a prelude to war, he was sure of it. When he'd taken over the office of the chancellor he had a difficult task stabilising the economy after the war and yet, nearly a decade later, it was only just beginning to stabilise.

\_But it was more than that. Isn't it? You're worried about David. Not that he'd believe you.\_

David, his youngest child, and only son, was from a marriage that ended before his political career even began. When the divorce finalised his ex-wife had already changed her name, and the kid's names, back to her maiden name. Now his son only spoke to him when he needed, or wanted, something, his barely adequate pay check couldn't cover. Like his car. And of course Adam gave it to him, hoping that it would at least mend some of the bridges that broke during the divorce and yet their relationship was still strained.

Unlike his sisters David had chosen the UNSC Army, enamoured by the immense history of all the different divisions, brigades and regiments. David wasn't the only one of Adam's children in the military; his eldest daughter was an officer in the Navy after all and his second daughter worked as a scientific consultant with ONI. So why was he worried about only one of his children?

When the small intercom built into his desk beeped, indicating he had a visitor, he was almost relieved and the fact that his secretary didn't call it in first meant it was someone he knew quite well. He took a moment to sort himself out, making sure he looked presentable before he buzzed through, letting his secretary know he was ready.

Seconds later the door opened and in walked Aiden Oduya, Minister of the Colonies. His dark complexion seemed ghostly white and his dark eyes were wide, darting all over the office before they settled on Adam.

"Aiden, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Adam asked, standing up and offering his hand over the wide desk. Oduya took his hand and the seat offered a second later. The minister's behaviour was beginning to make Adam worry. Of all the times they'd spent in each other's office meant they'd gotten to know each other pretty well. This was unlike Oduya.

"Adam," said Oduya. "There is no pleasure in what I am about to tell you."

Adam furrowed his brow, as he moved to a small cabinet tucked away in one corner. He grabbed two crystal tumblers and bottle of extremely rare scotch, poured two shots, he hesitated about putting the lid back before deciding to leave it open, just in case.

He sat himself back down at his desk, placing one tumbler in front of Oduya and one on a dog eared draft he'd been trying to work on for the last hour.

"What's wrong, Aiden? You looked spooked." Adam said as he offered

the drink. His chair, a large, comfortable, black leather office seat, appeared to sigh as the hydraulic pump cushioned his weight perfectly.

"Indeed," he said. "As you know, many vessels are going missing near Shanxi." Oduya motioned at the small video display on the wall where a young looking reporter still droned on about the missing ships.

"Of course, it's been all over the news for the last few days. Even the navy's finally getting involved."

"Yes, too little, too late. The president will be making a speech about it shortly but I wanted to come and tell you first," Oduya said, taking a large sip of the scotch. "The disappearing, it wasn't pirates or the NCA, it was an alien fleet. Over a hundred ships strong!"

"What!" Adam nearly choked on his drink. Suddenly Adam knew why Aiden looked as white as he did. All the blood in his own face drained away. The fallout from this would be massive and if the aliens are responsible for the missing transports then it could very well lead to a full scale war. "Aliens? Aiden, that'sâ€¦ I- I don't even know what to think of that. How can you be certain?"

"I received word from an ONI officer, one our colonies has already been invaded."

Adam's heart sunk. Now he really knew Oduya's reason for being here, he didn't want to hear. But he had to. To either confirm his fears or relieve him of them.

"Which one?"

\_Please, please don't be-\_

"Falkland," Oduya said after what felt like eternity. "The aliens launched an all-out invasion of the colony six hours ago. After that nearly all communications with the UNSC military forces and colonial government have ceased."

The world seemed to shrink away from him. Oduya's voice faded. The office got darker and the sound of rain hitting the window escalated as the light rain became a torrential down pour. The next time he'll see David could very well be as his body is unloaded from a UNSC troop ship, covered in a body bag. Could he bear witness to that? Witness to his own, and only, son's funeral? No. no, he couldn't.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>San Carlos Bay,<strong>

\*\*1723 Hours, September 21,2560\*\*

\*\*Sixteenth Fleet's Arrival; Eighty Hours\*\*

Sound was the first thing to come back to him. A distant thump of artillery and missile strikes echoed through the streets of the city. Sporadic gunfire could be heard in between the explosions as local police- what remained of them- and army units engaged the aliens

inside the city. Over it all he could hear Taylor and Allie talking, their words indistinguishable.

The pain in his leg and arm was quick to return, a painful burning sensation that spread up his thigh and into his hip. There was a ruffle of clothes and boots before he felt someone's hands on him and Allie shouted that he was alive. He opened his eyes- only to see a bright blur of unfocused light- the headache brought on by it was instant and painful but nothing compared to the pain in his leg.

David could hear Allie and Taylor fuss over him, talking to him. A thousand fire ants suddenly seemed to explode into his leg, the pain was ten time worse for a second- he gasped out loud in a cry of agony- before the pain disappeared.

After what felt like ages, normality seemed to return to him. His vision came back into focus and his hearing became less muffled, the ringing slowly faded. He was propped up against the reception desk inside the lobby, blood stained his left pant leg, and the wound- caused by a shattered reinforced bracing in the Foxhound- was sealed with biofoam.

The education minister was sat nearby, her suit was creased, rumpled by the crash and dirtied in the rush between the parliament building and now. Her hair was also equally dishevelled.

"Is the minister all right?" David asked with a grunt. Allie looked confused for a moment before answering.

"Fine, she's fine," Allie said. "What about you? You were out of it for a while, we've been hiding out here since. We don't know what to do. Well, I mean, we do but-"

"I'll live," David said, interrupting her. "We need to move, get the minister to safety. It'll take us over a day to reach Camp Moore on foot, though."

"We could call for an evac bird, we'd have to get up high to cut through all the mess." Taylor offered from his position near the wrecked truck. He was keeping an eye on the streets, making sure they weren't found and killed by enemy troops.

"Mess?" David asked.

"Yeah, we've been trying to contact Lieutenant Rowkin on the radio but our standard COMs are being jammed, or distorted, I don't know. Might that purple crap from the alien ships?"

"Purple crap, Taylor?"

"Yeah, those alien ship blew they released some sort purple cloud over the city, still hasn't reach street level yet, though." Taylor clarified. "Might explain why COMs aren't getting out. Even the Foxhound's radio stopped receiving."

"Right, how tall is this building?" David asked, trying to stand up. His head spun, the world became a dizzying blur before he collapsed onto the desk. "Ugh, that hurt."

"You sure you're okay, Dave?" Allie asked.

"Yeah, justâ€¦ just give me a sec," David said. He leant heavily on the reception desk to try and keep his balance. "How tall is this building?" he asked again, trying to redirect the conversation.

"Pretty big," Taylor said, looking up at the ceiling. "It's one of SinoViet's, there's a Sky Bridge about twenty stories up that connects to a parking structure. That has connections to at least a half dozen other buildings."

More explosions echoed throughout the city, not explosive. Taylor looked up into the sky outside and let out a jubilant cry of relief.

"Ha! Yes, looks like we got resupply coming in from orbit!"

In the skies above a flight of two dozen pelicans and multiple drop pods rocketed towards San Carlos and Camp Moore, staying wide of the few remaining alien ships. ODSST SOEIVs hurtled into the city, most impacting in the streets or rooftops while an unlucky few were blasted apart by the alien point defence weapons. Two pods impacted nearby, the sound of the hatches blasting open filled the streets as did the intensifying gunfire.

The two ODSSTs quickly moved off towards their objective, unaware of the four of them. Not that it mattered. They each had their own mission. The ODSSTs were probably doing something as equally important.

"Right, good. It'll distract the aliens away from us. Compared to the ODSSTs we're no threat. We'll go up, seems like our best bet." David said. He tried again to stand up on his own, Allie hovered nearby ready to catch him but he managed to stay up right. He didn't exactly want to fight or even head up twenty stories but he would if it meant surviving.

"Wait, if we're going up what about the purple stuff you said was leaking from the alien ships?" the minister interrupted from where she was sat. She was looking up at them all, her eyes narrowed in confusion and worry.

"She raises a good point Dave," Allie said. David cursed. He'd forgotten about that.

"Gas masks, we've all got one in our survival kit," David said, snapping his fingers as he realised.

"Yeah," Allie said. "We do, the minister doesn't." Allie made a vague circular motion with her hand, indicating the three of them.

"Lee," David said grimly. "Wilkins would have had one. I'll grab his, the minister can borrow mine." He said as he fished his own S90 gas mask out of its pack. When he got it out he passed it to the minister. Walking was more painful and slightly harder than he would have liked in the situation but with a clenched jaw he pushed the pain aside.

Taylor made sure he was covered while he crawled into the wreck to

grab Wilkins' gas mask. He paused for a moment as he reached in. Wilkins had been a friend to everyone on the team. Although, so far they seemed to be handling his death, the first human death any of them had seen, better than he was. Or maybe they were too afraid of dying here as well that any other emotions were blocked. When it was all over they would grieve. They would all grieve.

It took him several minutes of patting down Wilkins' mangled corpse to find it and when he did he let out a small grunt.

"Finally," he muttered to himself.

A minute later they were all up and ready to go. He paused a moment, looking at the minister. She'd put the mask on already and combined with her suit, she looked foolish. He failed to suppress his laughter.

"What? Why are you laughing at me?" her voice was muffled. He laughed harder but controlled himself. Instead of replying straight away he grabbed the mask off her head, pulling it up so she could see, speak and breathe properly.

"You won't need that at the moment, ma'am." David said, still grinning despite everything. "We've got twenty flights of stairs to get up first. You'll want to breathe correctly until then."

The minister, despite the professional demeanour she presented herself with when they first met, let out an indignant huff but said nothing else. Taylor bumped his shoulder and David noted Taylor had his own grin plastered on.

"C'mon," David said. Ignoring the glare from the education minister. "We better get moving. It's getting pretty cold already. We'll get to the parking structure then grab a quick bite to eat before we move on."

So they moved. David went first, Taylor second, the minister in the middle and Allie watching their backs. They moved through the lobby, using their flashlights as power for most of the building had been disrupted, leaving most of it in darkness with only the small green emergency lighting as guidance.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN; I just want to say something now; this isn't about the political grand scheme. There won't be lengthy diplomatic scenes and whatnot. this is about how first contact, and the war, effects certain characters. Yes spartans will appear but won't be main characters. \*\*

## 10. Chapter 10

\*\*San Carlos Bay, \*\*

\*\*1731 Hours, September 21, 2560\*\*

The sky bridge hadn't been as far up as they'd thought, only half Taylor's estimated height. The wide, elegant stair well opened up into a large lobby, similar to the one downstairs, only the entrance

way led to a wide foot bridge, covered in a pointed roof and closed off with sturdy industrial glass that offered a grand view of the cityscape. The place had been totally abandoned during the initial invasion an hour or so ago. The people who worked here had fled in such a panic and rush they left the place in tatters. What was just a few hours ago a neatly and carefully organised foyer and reception area was filled with scattered papers and other bits of everyday life, a dropped data pad, a knocked over office plant or a designer glass table, shattered and broken. A small fire raged in one corner, quickly picking itself up as it neared its flashpoint, the cause was an alien fighter that had been shot down and straight into the SinoViet tower.

What remained of the fighter's burning carcass had ploughed into the glass and steel tower several floors up, only coming to halt after being snagged on dozens of unbroken wires and cables that lines the walls. Paper- loose documents scattered in the mad rush to leave or simple magazines to be read by visitors as they waited in one of the comfortable chairs that lined one wall- had been set alight.

David had them double time it through the lobby, not wanting to be there when the fire finally did reach flashpoint, then the whole room would quickly be set ablaze.

Part of the sky bridge had been blown apart, a gaping hole in the wall, floor and ceiling exposed them completely but they were quick enough that nothing saw them. For that David was happy. He was too tired, too sore and too scared to get into a firefight with the aliens. He planned on avoiding them as much as possible.

It wasn't long before they made it to the multi-story parking garage where, after a quick haul up another set of stairs to reach the top, they got a good view of the sky. The blue in the sky was quickly fading into a violet twilight. On the horizon, through the towers, they could see a large band of clouds spanning the sky. It stretched from one end to the other. A cold breeze blew through the city streets, sending a shiver down David's spine.

Another explosion echoed in the city, so close the ground beneath their feet shook and nearly threw the minister to the ground.

"Damn, that was a close one," Taylor said after regaining his balance. "Look up there! The hospital, which should be tall enough!" The hospital towered over most of the other buildings, except the police headquarters and a few other multi-colonial corporations with buildings in the city.

"Right, how do we get to it, Taylor?" David asked, looking up at the hospital before bringing his gaze back down, quickly remembering how bad things had got at the parliament and how fast that happened. "It's at least a click away."

"Right, and we're in an abandoned parking garage. If we can't find a ride out of here then we really are special, Dave." Taylor replied before starting to head for the closest car.

"No, that'll just draw attention to us. I don't want to try and outrun an alien gunship for a second time today. What's the quickest route on foot?"

Taylor paused a moment to think about it. Even Allie tried to think of something. In the end it was the minister who spoke up first. It was the first time she'd spoken since they left the lobby.

"We could use the tunnels under the city, near the superintendent's data centre. We should be able to get there unnoticed. Assuming the aliens haven't decided to go poking around the data centre yet." It was a good plan, better than any other put forward so far.

"Okay," David said. "Where's the closest access tunnel?"

"There should be one near here. We'd have to go down to street level to find it, though." David nodded.

"Right, okay. Allie, go on point, find us the access tunnel. Don't engage the aliens unless you have to. We'll be right behind you, so don't worry." David said. He slapped her shoulder, not hard but with enough force to cause her to sway. She jumped to it, moving the way they'd come.

They moved quickly, their speed only hampered by the minister's age and lack of physical fitness. It took them until it was almost completely dark to find the access tunnel and by then it had gotten so cold their breath billowed out in bone white puffs and David felt the chill even through his armour. He couldn't imagine how cold the minister felt in her suit. He could see her shivering, dancing from foot to foot in a vain attempt to stay warm.

When they got inside David let out a sigh of relief. It was warmer down in the tunnels than on the streets but not by much. They didn't stop until they were in a large room filled with bits of maintenance equipment, obviously not valuable enough to be locked up. There, on the grease and oil stained floor David finally decided to rest. So far it had been the worst day of his life. He was tired, scared out his mind and sore. His leg hurt from his injuries and he, like the rest of his team, was battered and bruised.

They had a quick bite from the rations in their backpacks, just enough to keep them going. David shared his with the minister, offering her his energy bar which she took and wolfed down like a starving orphan with a scrap of food.

They stayed there for a while, just long enough to catch their breath and calm down. When they moved again they were quiet, sticking to the shadows in the inadequately lit tunnels. They were careful not to burn themselves on exposed steam pipes or other exposed tubing that could have been as hot.

As they neared the data centre they heard something, a squad of alien soldiers moving towards the entrance for the data centre came out of another tunnel, and there was four of them, each covering the other. David pushed the minister back against the wall, hidden only by the shadows and a small recess. He motioned for Taylor and Allie to power down their weapons, the small lights might give away their position. His breath hitched in his throat as the alien's flashlight lit up the tunnel ahead of them, mere inches away from revealing his and his team's position.

The alien soldiers moved on towards the data centre- away from where David wanted to go. He hesitated a moment. His mission, as simple as



it was, didn't involve the data centre or the aliens going there. But could he just leave it? Who knew what type of information the AI held. As an industrial city with large mechanical factories and multiple elevator strands David was somewhat sure the AI would have to powerful enough to run all of that without so much as a fraction of a second delay in its processing power. In short, it was too valuable to lose to the aliens. If the aliens destroyed, or worse, captured, the AI the colony, no matter the outcome of the battle, would collapse. It would cost millions to replace it and millions would be lost every day, of not every hour, the factories and elevators were silent. Taylor saw him dithering.

"Dave, we can't take them on. We got to get the minister out of here," he said quietly.

"We can't let them get the AI though," Dave replied. "It's too damn important."

"To who? The colony? They can get a new one!" Taylor said confusedly.

"No," David hesitated a second. "To the UNSC, okay? An AI powerful enough to run the city, factories and orbital elevators? It'd have to be one of those Smart AIs. They know everything there is to know about the UNSC. If the aliens get their hands on that information, it could cripple us. They'd know everything about us and we'd know nothing about them. We'd be on the back foot for the rest of the war!"

"He's right private Taylor," the minister said. "An AI like that does have intimate knowledge of the UNSC and all the colonies we trade with. There's nearly a hundred and fifty worlds on that list, nearly two billion people live on those colonies. You'd be helping them just as much as helping us and the UNSC."

Taylor was conflicted. He knew they were right, but it was still a near suicidal idea to take on the aliens in such close quarters while outnumbered. Then there was the fact that, like David, he didn't want to fight them. He wanted to survive the whole thing.

Before he could say anything though the radio crackled into life. A short burst of static yielded to a soft feminine voice. There was a certain artificial, digital, element to her voice.

"Troopers, I'm Annabelle, San Carlos' AI. I need your help," the voice said. David looked at Taylor and shrugged in a 'told you so' type of way.

"Taylor and I will do what we can. Allie, go with the minister. Get to the hospital or better yet, link up with any UNSC forces you can find. Taylor, we'll help the AI." David said after a moment. He'd made his choice, now he just hoped he lived long enough to see it through. Taylor opened his mouth to say something, only to shut it again. Deciding to hold his tongue.

"But, Dave-" Allie started before he cut her off.

"Look, the damn AI needs our help. And while I'm sure there are better equipped and better trained soldiers for this we're the closest. We can stall them long enough for someone else to come in

and finish the job," said David with about as much conviction as a dead man. He already felt like one. He was sure this would just turn his feelings into reality.

"Go, now," David almost whispered. A lump in his throat formed, like it had when he first got shipped off for basic, and then as he boarded the ship that brought him here. Now he felt like he was getting on the train to hell.

No one moved. Only the minister shuffled her feet slightly in place.

"Damn it, go!" David barked. He had to. If he waited a moment longer, if they didn't do this now, he'd lose his already loose nerve. Allie looked at him, then at Taylor who offered a sympathetic shrug of his shoulders before he patted hers. He pushed her away slightly as well. Enough for her to finally start moving her feet.

"We'll meet you at the hospital. If not, then Camp Moore." David said. He tilted his head, hand on the bridge of his helmet. He nodded at Allie, then the minister. "Ma'am. Stay with Private Green, she'll get you to safety."

"I'm sure," the minister offered a small smile. She obviously felt the same way he did about his and Taylor's little side mission.

They split up. David and Taylor made their way towards the aliens, keeping as quiet as possible while Allie and the minister headed for the hospital and UNSC forces.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>202<strong>\*\*\*nd\*\*\*\* Shock Infantry, 2153\*\*

After they'd secured the landing zone for the general and the adrenalin stopped pumping for the first time since he'd entered his pod, Adrien realised just how cold it was. His armour was made to keep the user at a comfortable temperature but it was struggling. Turian's didn't usually go groundside on cold planets without specialised equipment, which they currently didn't have. The humans didn't seem to mind the cold too much. Or maybe they, like him, had been full of adrenalin and in a heightened state of alert, blocking out the cold. He hoped it was the latter of the two otherwise the humans would have an advantage over them.

When the general touched down Adrien jogged up to it just in time to greet the general as he stepped out of the troop bay.

"General Arterius, sir," Adrien said with a salute. "I heard you wanted to speak to me." Adrien walked alongside the general as they walked into the building. Troopers had already cleared up most of the mess, including the bodies. The corpses had been moved to the back of the compound and buried. No one knew of any human burial traditions, and it didn't matter they were the enemy, but it was a small token of respect the turians were willing to show the dead.

"Yes," the general said with a slight nod. They entered what looked to be the main office where a large desk dominated the far side of the room and a smaller table, surrounded by padded chairs, lay in the centre. The larger of the two desks or tables was decorated with a

seal. A circular motif, coloured in the same green as the grass that dominated the planet's landmasses, flanked by two golden animals and transcribed with writing beyond his limited knowledge of the human language. "I need you to take a team into the tunnels below the city. We believe there is a central computer, an extremely advanced VI or maybe even several of them, where there could be valuable information.

"Hopefully it'll also allow us access to the orbital elevators, get troops and heavy armour down behind the enemy lines, but the important thing is that information. It'll contain coordinates to other colonies, hopefully also their home world, Earth. We should also get a good idea of their fleet size if we're lucky." Arterius said. He turned to face Adrien, his face completely stoic.

"I shouldn't need to tell you how important this is, Lieutenant." Adrien nodded. The general didn't need to say anything else.

"No, sir," Adrien said. "I'll take my team and secure the data." He went to leave but the general grabbed his arm, stopping him

"Take three of your best. A small team will have a better chance of slipping through without getting noticed." Arterius ordered.

"Yes, sir." Adrien left the human office to the general. As he stepped out several support staff brushed past him, setting up equipment. Outside, huddled together, what remained of his platoon, now no larger than a squad looked over at him.

"Quition, Camdros and Aetdos, you're with me. The rest of you are staying here," Adrien said. He pulled his rifle off his back and rested its familiar weight in his arms. Quinton, Camdros and Aetdos stayed put while the rest filtered away, looking to do whatever was needed of them.

"What's the play, boss?" Quinton asked as they moved towards the busted gates.

"We're heading under the city. The general believes there's an advanced VI or multiple VI constructs inside a bunker under the city." Adrien stopped by the mangled gates and turned to face the three of them. "Our job is to infiltrate the bunker and gain access to the VI or VI's. Our main priority will be information regarding colonies and defence forces. The general also wants us to try and take control of the orbital elevators to get troops and armour behind enemy lines in the south but only as a secondary objective."

His men looked at him through their darkened visors and nodded. They gave a courteous 'yes sir' and were ready. Adrien led them into the city, sticking close the buildings and, when possible, going through them as cover. Overhead human attack drones had started swarming over the cityscape, flying in sorties against turian forces.

A trio of drones flew overhead, whooshing past the team as they headed cracked open an access door into the tunnels below the streets, located nearly three miles from the captured compound that general Arterius was turning into his command post. The tunnel access was located under an overpass a few blocks from a terraced plaza that housed numerous stores, caf  s and other buildings that formed part of the large civilian multi-layered concourse.

Inside the tunnels it was damp and relatively warm. Ever since the planet's sun began to set the already cold air started to freeze. A cold, bitter wind bristled across them and despite their armour working its best Adrien could feel the bitterness of the air around him. Now in the tunnels his armour was better able to cope. As they moved through the eerily empty streets, with only sporadic bursts of gunfire and a steady, deep, '\_whump\_' of human artillery, he heard the screams of drop pods as they entered the atmosphere and began their rapid descent into the city. They were followed closely by the strange shaped human shuttles that hurtled out of the sky at an incredible pace once safely inside the atmosphere the shuttles broke off, levelling out and heading for the human military base out in the valley.

The human's deployment pods impacted all across the city and reports filtered down over the communication channels. They had been dropped off by a triad of vessels that had bypassed the main fleet after taking on two patrol flotillas. That had Adrien's gut churning. Three ships took on two flotillas and bypassed an entire fleet. That wasn't unusual in space warfare. It was meant to be impossible. Even the Krogan had never managed it during the rebellions centuries ago.

Adrien was nervous. If the humans had ships capable of taking on two flotillas and deploy reinforcements before the main fleet could respond, even though the fleet lay in between the planet and the outer system, then they could very well bypass \_other\_ turian fleets. But as they entered the tunnels Adrien forced his mind back onto the task at hand.

Adrien turned on the small flashlight underneath the barrel of his rifle as they moved deeper into the maze of passageways that underlined the city. It took them what felt like hours of wondering the catacomb like passageways until they finally reached a tidy, smooth door that stubbornly refused to open. The sudden change in construction and design materials made it obvious that they were getting close to their target. The door, a flat, onyx coloured material, was decorated by a simple badge or coat of arms that represented the city. While his translator did an okay job with the human's spoken language it didn't help with all the writing and labels that seemed to mark nearly every surface. So far they hadn't even discovered the name of the city. Even though it was right in front of him he had no idea what the strange script meant. The only thing he recognised was the badge, the same one from the desk inside the human building and plastered on several structures inside the city.

"Camdros, do you have any breaching charges?" Adrien asked after several minutes of trying, and failing, to open the door. They were in a bottleneck- only one way in or out- unless they got the security door open. And while he was sure that they were, at the moment, safe, he didn't want to take the risk.

"Yes, Lieutenant," he replied, stepping up to the door with a small, square device which hissed as the small vacuum sealer activated, holding it onto the door long enough for him to step back and detonate the shaped charges inside.

The explosion blew open the door as predicted and the corridor beyond

was choked with smoke and debris, water sprinklers activated to try and suppress the small fires caused by the breaching. They quickly moved in and through. Moving through the facility, using the maintenance tunnels to move through quickly, they reached the elevator that led them deeper into the facility.

It stopped seven levels down, opening up to a large room with only three doors out and all of them lit up red. A quick inspection confirmed his idea that they were locked. That was bad. They couldn't blow open every locked door they came across. But right now they were boxed in with no way in or out. Again. They blasted through the door directly opposite the elevator, revealing a wide corridor. Both walls were made of a glass like material that allowed Adrien to see the massive computer hardware hidden behind them and several floor tiles had been lifted up, revealing more hardware. He suddenly realised he was \_inside \_the VI.

Work station, offices and maintenance posts were located at regular intervals- all of them empty. They searched their way down the extensive corridor looking for a way down into the lower levels. The room at the far end was empty save for a sole computer terminal connected to two arms that rose up in the centre of the room. There were dozens of smaller offshoots and corridors hidden away behind sealed doors that, despite all the non-explosive persuasion Adrien tried, refused to yield.

Aetdos worked on the terminal, using his Omni-tool to interface with it, to try and lift up whatever was hidden in the floor. While Adrien was certain it was just more computer hardware, he was also hoping it would allow them some form of access to the other sublevels.

"I think I've got it, boss. Looks like it was on an isolated system, the VI couldn't do anything." Aetdos said. Almost as soon as the data stack started rising up from the floor the lights went out and a red emergency light lit up, flashing and descending the room into chaos as the door slid shut and white gas started pouring from the ceiling and walls.

His armour identified the gas as argon, it was so cold Adrien could feel it through his armour and if it wasn't for his suits vacuum rating and inbuilt air scrubber he'd be dead by the time he scrambled to the door. As he reached it the door slid open and his shields started taking hits.

"Contact! In the hall!" Adrien called out as he shuffled out of the way of the door. He heard someone cry out as their shield cracked and bullets ripped into his armour and body. Someone hit the wall next to him with a grunt.

"How many of them are there?" Camdros asked.

"Don't know! We need to get out of here though!" Adrien replied. The argon was beginning to cake his armour, making movement more difficult. Already the floor was beginning to cover over with a thin layer of ice. He leant out of the doorway, he couldn't see past the foggy cloud of gas but tracer rounds worked both ways. He aimed for where he thought the fire was coming from and let loose a burst of fire from his rifle. He was rewarded with a scream of agony from the human opponent but his own kinetic barrier flared up and cracked. He took a round in his armour-less shoulder, a searing pain shot across

it as he fell back onto the floor.

\* \* \*

><p>"Annabelle, right?" David said, clicking on his radio. The AI was quick to respond, her voice, as smooth and calm as it was, still held a soft, synthetic element.<p>

"Yes, trooper?" she replied.

"What exactly are we getting into here?" David asked. He and Taylor stayed where they were as Allie led the minister out of the tunnels.

"The aliens are moving towards my data centre. It's inside a secure facility but it wasn't meant to withstand an attack." Her voice seemed to crack. David wasn't sure if that was simulated emotion or the radio connection shorting out. David didn't know a lot about AIs. Especially the smart ones like Annabelle but he did know that they were supposed to be extremely lifelike in their emotional capabilities. If that was true then David could somewhat understand. She, even though she isn't real per say, was scared.

"Right, where are we going then?" David asked. A small dot appeared on his eyepiece a second after he finished speaking.

"Follow this route, it'll take you down into the lower levels where you can gain access to the data centre. You'll be able to catch up with them there." David nodded but said nothing. Taylor looked at him, unsure.

"We'll be fine, let's just do this and get back up topside." David said.

"Yeah, let's." Taylor replied.

They moved through the tunnels, following the waypoints until they heard an explosion and the ground beneath their feet shook violently, causing Taylor to lose his balance and fall into the wall. The lights flickered rapidly, threatening to fail and plunge them into darkness and dust, long settled and undisturbed rained down on top of them.

"What was that?" Taylor coughed out as he righted himself.

"I don't know!" David replied.

"It was the alien strike team, they've breached one of the outer doorways into the data centre. They're still a few levels up but it won't take them long to find the elevator!" Annabelle said, almost frantically. She may have been an AI but this was her home the aliens were braking into. They were braking into \_her.\_ "You have to hurry, troopers!"

"Yeah," David said, still coughing. "We're on it. Come on Taylor, we got to move!" Taylor waved him off as he began to move. They double timed it into the main access door which slip open with a near silent hiss. Annabelle showed them the route to a set of emergency stairs tucked away in far side of the lobby.

They hustled it down with David leading the way until they reached sublevel seven where Annabelle veered them off the stairs and into a small access way that led into the main corridor where several exposed data stacks and terminals were up, part way through standard maintenance and checks.

"Where are they?" David whispered into his COM. He looked left and right, hoping to spot the aliens before they spotted him.

"They're less than a minute ahead of you, heading for a closed data stack that would allow them access to lower levels." The AI replied.

"Right, can you do anything? Confuse them long enough for us to get a decent firing line on them?" David asked as he moved from the door into the hall and then into cover behind a raised stack of hardware.

"I'll try, but you have to hurry, they're accessing the lock on the data stack!"

"Can't you do anything about that?"

"No! Internal security is on an isolated system, I can't access it. It's a safety feature to allow technicians into my data centre's core just in case I go crazy when I hit rampancy!" Annabelle was almost screaming in his ear now. The AI was scared, that he could understand but she seemed to be getting more and more unhinged as they got closer to the data centre's core.

"Damn it, what the hell is rampancy? I- don't answer that, just distract them, we'll take it from here," David replied, his own voice cracked as the full weight of what he was about to do settled on his mind.

"Done, move quickly! I've locked them in and activated the fire suppression system, that'll keep them cold, just be quick trooper!" the AI responded.

They rushed down to see the door at the end of the hall open up, freezing cold argon gas spilled out like steam from a sauna and covered the floor around it with a dense layer of icy cold fog. David spotted a black, alien figure in the cloud, raised his weapon up and hesitated. He aimed but didn't fire. Taylor however, didn't hesitate and let loose a barrage of fire from his rifle which impacted the alien figure. A blue shimmer lit up around it as the bullets bounced off. The sound of Taylor's MA5 caused David to let loose his own torrent of fire, the blue around the alien intensified as it tumbled into cover behind the door frame.

David took cover behind a work station on a slightly elevated position while Taylor went for a hardware tower almost right next to him. He saw the alien figure lean out, rifle in hand and let loose a short, concentrated volley at Taylor who, at the same time, leant out to fire. Taylor crumpled to the ground, his hip shattered as the rounds tore the flesh and bone to shreds, screaming in pain.

"Taylor!" David shouted. His heart raced as he watched in slow motion as one of his closest friends on the colony collapsed in a whirlwind

of blood and bone. David reached into his, belt, his hand scrambling for a grenade which he promptly threw into the room. A few seconds later an explosion wrecked the room. At least one of the aliens was dead, as evidence from the arm and bits of torso flew out of the doorway. Another one was screaming somewhere in the back of the argon filled room.

David leapt from his cover and over to where Taylor lay squirming his way back into cover.

"Are they dead?" David asked Annabelle.

"As far as I can tell. I don't have biometric sensors in there, it's a data stack, not a security checkpoint."

"Well, at least they're not firing at us anymore." David replied.

"Damn it, Dave!" Taylor shouted at him as he reached him. David dropped his rifle next to him as he reached for what remained of his medical supplies. Taylor's hip and pelvis were shattered, shredded into mushy bits of flesh. What remained of the biofoam was of little use so David tried to apply gauze that would last long enough to get him to proper medic who could do a far better job than David. "I knew this was a stupid idea!"

"Yeah it was, but we're alive. That's the important thing," David said as he tried to haul the younger man up onto his good side. Taylor let out a cry as his broken hip twisted slightly in the process, sending agonising pain shooting up and down his body.

"Easy for you to say," Taylor grunted out through gritted teeth.

"Come on, let's get out of here." David said, taking a step forward. Away from the broken bodies and black and white smoke of destruction. Taylor managed one step before crumbling in a series of pain induced spasms.

"That isn't going to happen, Dave," Taylor said. In response David bent down, grabbed Taylor's good leg and hurled him onto his shoulders in a fireman's carry. He stopped just long enough to pick up his rifle and clip it to his chest plate before he started back up to the surface.

"Oh god, that hurts," Taylor grumbled almost non-stop as David carried him up back the way they came. When they got to the stairwell Annabelle spoke up over the COM.

"I've managed to contact an ODST fireteam nearby, they've got a medic that should be able to help. Follow the waypoints, it'll be the fastest route back to the surface near the ODSTs.

"Cheers, Annabelle," David said as he struggled up the stairs. By the time he reached the top Taylor had passed out. Either from blood loss or shock and David was struggling to move, his leg muscles burnt, his arms started shaking and his face, burnt red with exhaustion. Sweat poured freely from underneath his helmet, covering his eyes which began to sting, his vision started going blurry.



The cold, sharp air outside, in the streets, felt like a blessing as he stumbled out of a burnt out San Carlos council building. A fat, ugly box truck lay in the road, crashed against a streetlamp which had crumpled on top of the truck. David almost collapsed as he reached it. He set Taylor down as gently as possible before sitting next to his unconscious friend, totally exhausted. After a moment of haze where David fought to stay awake he reached for his canteen, took a long, steady drink. Emptying it.

It took what felt like an eternity for the ODSs to turn on to the street, fifty metres from his position. They moved quickly over to him, their black full body armour made little noise as they moved up from cover to cover. Their armour allowed them to blend in almost perfectly in the night, David only saw them because of the small blue inverted triangles that appeared over their heads in his eyepiece. Eight of them rounded the corner in total. One of them wielded a sniper rifle and stayed back, using the bonnet of a skidded out sedan to steady his or her aim. The first ODS to reach him was a staff sergeant, who knelt down to check on him as another ODS, marked with a symbol of a medic on their shoulder, checked on Taylor and immediately got to work.

"You okay trooper?" The sergeant asked in a gruff, accented voice.

"Yeah, AI is secured for now too, sir." David replied through deep gasps of air. The ODS let out a small snort of amusement.

"Not bad for a couple of army boys. Come on," the sergeant offered his hand which David took. The ODS sergeant hurled David to his feet so quickly his head spun and he nearly collapsed again. "You'll be fine now, kid. You did well. The AI filled us in when she asked for our help. Always up to the ODSs to save the day in the end."

A couple of the ODSs keeping them covered chuckled but otherwise remained silent. The medic did their work and quickly had Taylor on a stabilised and on a stretcher, ready to move. Two of the ODSs grabbed the stretcher and began to move back down the street while the rest covered them. The medic stood up and gave the 'okay' hand signal to the sergeant.

"He'll be out of commission for a while but he'll live," she said. At full height she was just a few inches shorter than either David or the sergeant.

"Good, check on the trooper here, nice and quick. We've got to move." He replied. It was strange for David, watching two fully armoured figures talk to one another with any facial expressions hidden behind silver-blue reflective visors.

After quick inspection the medic gave him a stim booster to keep David on his feet long enough to get to safety. She even knelt down and re-dressed his leg wound after the gauze and bandages became snarled and twisted in all the commotion in the tunnels.

The stim worked in minutes and when it kicked in he felt better, more alert and more responsive. At least now he was able to keep up with the ODSs as they moved towards the hospital which dominated the skyline ahead of them.

"The hospital is one of the last places still secure north of the river. The Army's kept a pretty good grip on the area surrounding it. You'll both be medivaced from there." The sergeant said as they hoofed it as quickly and as quietly as possible.

When they turned onto a road two blocks away they were greeted by a UNSC barricade manned by multiple Army troopers. It didn't take them long to suss out that the ODSs and David weren't aliens and they were allowed to pass. For the first time that night David felt safe as they crossed a second barricade manned by even more troops which were quick to get Taylor inside the hospital where he could be taken care of properly. David was shown to a room where he'd have to wait to be taken back to Camp Moore. He unclipped his backpack and dumped it on one end of a row of lightly padded seats. He lied down on top of it and quickly fell asleep. Totally drained from the day's events.

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><p><strong>AN: One of my longest ever chapters to celebrate chapter ten of this story. Please leave a review and let me know what you think because, as it is, it feels like the whole community surrounding this crossover genre (HaloMass Effect) is dying a slow death. Being a fan of this genre for years now it is hard to see it like this so give some life back to it!\*\*

## 11. Chapter 11

\*\*\_AN; Another chapter! leave a review! Review's are love!\_\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><em>Dear Mom and Dad,<em>

\_This time tomorrow I'll be on the front line. Don't worry, I'll be fine. We're the best of the best. We'll have the colony back before you know it. I admit, I am nervous, but this is just a grey patch in history, I'm sure of that. After that it'll be blue sky all the way, right? It's strange to think that less than a year ago I was still in High School and tomorrow I'll be in the middle of a battlefield.

\_

\_I'm sorry, you probably didn't want to think about that did you?

\_

\_I'll be back home soon, say 'hi' to Sammy for me would you, keep him out of trouble. And give Marmite a hug from me. \_

\_I'll write again soon,\_

\_Your loving son, Mark.\_

\_Personal letter from Marine, Private Mark Iron to his parents less than a day before his death during the Liberation of Falkland.\_

\*\*UNSC \*\*\_\*\*Vanguard, \*\*\_\*\*Sixteenth Fleet Flagship, En-route to Darwin System,\*\*

The bridge of the massive vessel hummed with activity. From his position at the wide holographic table near the rear of the bridge, Admiral Indara and several senior and junior officers on the Vanguard surrounded it, studying the display. A small recon force of two frigates and a destroyer had entered the system, bypassed the main bulk of the alien fleet and dropped off as much supplies and troops as they could before retreating out-system. They had allowed Indara to get a feel for the alien fleet, how they moved, how they fought, and how many there were and where they were.

"Latest SIGINT from Darwin, Admiral," George said as the display changed slightly. His avatar stood a meter tall on top of the table, next to Indara. The view of the system showed the entire solar plane, every planet, every asteroid and every ship. The red triangles that congregated in a large fleet, nearly rivalling his own in size, represented the enemy ships. The main bulk hovered gently near the outer edges of Falkland's gravity well while small pickets of other, smaller ships, spread out in standard patrols near the system edges. At first glance it didn't reveal a whole lot about the aliens but a deeper inspection revealed a lot that could be used. "It's quite interesting really."

"Yes it is," Indara mused.

"What are you thinking, Admiral?" Coombs asked as he studied the projection. From each of the enemy vessels a thin blue line arced ahead of them, marking trajectories of the alien ships and a timer as to when they would reach their destination.

"Lieutenant," Indara spoke to his navigation officer and she perked up, tearing her gaze from the myriad of crisscrossing lines and detailed planetary scans. "What do make of this?" She hid her surprise at being asked for input by an Admiral by hiding it behind a furrowed brow as she shifted her gaze back to the display. It took her a moment to respond.

"They've got standard patrols around the outer edges of the system, especially near where the recon forced dropped in."

"Why?" Indara questioned. He already knew the answer, so did Captain Coombs and Commander Fall.

"To act as scouts, an early warning beacon for the main fleet. They don't have FTL sensors like most of our ships but they do have access to FTL COMs. And the way they're positioned above the planet, with big ships at the back, little ships up front, it's like an old rifle firing line." She said, highlighting the different alien ships she was talking about. "It also suggests, though I may be wrong about this, that the big ships have a greater weapons range than the smaller ones which, from the reports of the scout fleet are very fast and could be used as weapon ships, harassing bigger opponents until they buckle under the strain." Jorgensen took a moment to collect her breathe as the other officers watched her. Captain Coombs smiled slightly, nodded tapped in a few controls.

"A fairly reasonable way of thinking, Lieutenant," he said as footage of the skirmish between the recon ships and two alien patrols. "The smaller ships, almost analogues to a corvette, are extremely manoeuvrable. And the way they coordinate their attacks suggests a wolf-pack mentality. Individually they're too weak to do any serious

damage but together they could, given enough time, bring down even the biggest prey. Although they appeared to have difficulty shrugging off Archer missile strikes. Suggesting a point defence system unused to handling that many incoming objects."

"So," Indara said, taking control of the conversation again. "We have a rough idea of how they fight and where they are. The question is this; what is the best way to hit them as hard as possible?"

"We hit them from behind," Jorgensen said after a minute of silence. All eyes shifted to her again but she was totally engrossed in the display. Even George, the AI whose intelligence was without equal among humans and had years participating in and running simulated battles looked at her with curiosity showing. After a slight shove from another lieutenant she continued, a slight blush on her face from embarrassment. "They're concentrating their patrols near the primary Slipspace entry point of the system because that's where the recon fleet entered the system and that's where they think we will as well. As a result most of the lighter warships are in the patrols and not escorting the cruisers above the planet. If we enter here, at the secondary Slipspace entry point we would come in and would almost be on top of the heaviest ships in the alien fleet before they even knew we were there. We smash the bulk of the enemy fleet and the rest should scatter, heading for home."

Indara nodded in approval of the thought. George's avatar looked at the lieutenant, squinted as numbers and equations ran up and down his body, and then he smiled.

"Our young Lieutenant Jorgensen is right, Admiral," George said. Jorgensen blushed again at the praise. Blue triangles representing the fleet appeared by the secondary Slipspace entry point and they surged forward. A double layered bubble radiated out from their arrival. The outer most bubble represented light, their arrival would go unnoticed as long as the enemy stayed out of that bubble. The second bubble represented the inevitable release of intense radiation caused by the ripping in the fabric of the universe as the fleet tore back into real space. On an individual level the radiation was barely noticed but an entire fleet would cause a flood of radiation that spread out across the star system until it was caught in the electromagnetic field of the planets. It would cause one hell of a light show. "From the predicted patrol vectors, velocity and positions of the alien fleet we would be arriving in a blind spot. From there we would be able to pick up speed from the gas giant here, a slingshot round would allow us to get close enough to the main alien fleet that the patrols would be too far away to help."

Indara smiled like a wolf. His Officers chattered excitedly as they went over the plan again and again. George altering the simulation every time. Trying to provide the Admiral and Captain with varying scenarios that were totally possible and some that weren't. They were, after all, dealing with an alien race who might not, probably did not, think like humans.

**\*\*San Carlos Bay, 2560, Sixteenth Fleet's ETA; 72 hours. \*\***

The sound of a thousand hammers battering an unbreakable glass wall woke him up some hours later. A ferocious howl echoed through the room as the lights overhead flickered slightly. The howl died down for a brief second before intensifying two fold. With a startled and

sluggish realisation of what was happening David forced himself up onto his feet. The massive floor to ceiling windows would, under normal circumstances, display a wide vista of the northern city skyline. Only now they showed a wall of white interlaced with flashes of grey.

A rush of commotion outside the door had David turn around again to watch as soldiers head past, some of them sporting injuries. The ODSST medic that had helped save David and Taylor stopped at the entrance to the door. Her helmet was attached to her hip, revealing her tanned skin and short dark hair. She looked haggard.

"Get your asses up, troopers!" she shouted. A worried frown was hidden by a near perpetual look of anger and aggressiveness normally worn by ODSSTs. "Those of you who can still fight get up and get downstairs, speak to Lieutenant Hadabo, he'll put you to use, the rest of you stay here and wait for someone to get you out of here!"

David grabbed his gear, shoved it on as quickly as possible and followed the scattering of other soldiers doing the same. Lieutenant Hadabo was in the wide open reception area, using a series of light portable tables to host a display of different, brilliant coloured maps of the surrounding area and highlighted positions. Hadabo was directing people left and right, into defensive positions all around the hospital, the heaviest of which were out the front where wide open streets and plenty of access roads allowed emergency services quick access to and from the hospital.

"Sir," David said as he approached the tired looking Lieutenant. After a minute of almost awkward silence the Lieutenant looked up at him, away from the display's and maps scattered about and away from the NCOs helping the Lieutenant organise the evacuation and defence of the hospital.

"Corporal," Hadabo acknowledged him.

"Lieutenant, I was told to report to you." David said.

"Yes, I need men to reinforce the northern perimeter. We've got the damn birds pushing at us through the storm, looks like a desperate attempt to push us back across the river before the storm rolls in with full force." Hadabo pointed to a map that highlighted UNSC positions on this side of the river, most of them had large X's through them, indicating they were either taken or destroyed. There was more of X's on the north side of the river than there was UNSC bases.

"Sir, what about my squad? Private Taylor was rushed in here, I haven't seen him since and Private Green, I haven't seen or heard anything from her since we split up. She was escorting the Minister of Education."

"Private Taylor was evacuated some time ago. As for Private Green and the Education Minister, they haven't come through here. I certainly would have heard about a VIP coming through." Hadabo apologised but didn't look too bothered. David was willing to guess that Hadabo was more worried about the men and women under his own command.

"Right," David felt his heart drop like a stone and his throat

tighten. "Understood, Lieutenant. Who am I reporting to on the northern gate?"

"Sergeant James Miller, ODSF, you can't miss him. He was the one that pulled you and Taylor out of that mess you were in."

David saluted and left. Before he went outside he grabbed a balaclava and goggles and put them on before venturing outside where he was blasted with a rush of freezing cold wind, snow and hail. Finding his way to the northern perimeter was difficult in the weather and he only hoped that the aliens were having as much difficulty as he was navigating through it.

He found the ODSFs near a series of hastily deployed barriers and armoured vehicles. Heavy machine guns scanned the road and adjacent buildings, ready to fire at the slightest hint of trouble. ODSFs, marines and army troopers were hunkered down, rifles ready. Civilian cars and damaged Foxhounds and Warthogs made up cover for infantry just outside of the main perimeter.

As he reached the main defensive line he found sergeant Miller, the burly ODSF sergeant that had led a squad to help him and Taylor earlier that day, giving orders to a squad of bandaged up marines that looked younger than David.

"Sergeant," David said over the howling wind as he approached the ODSF after the marines were dismissed.

"Lance corporal, good to see you on your feet again." Miller said. The ODSF Medic, the same woman that had probably saved Taylor's life, came up to them. "We've got those damn birds coming in any moment now with light armour and several infantry platoons. I hope you're damn ready for this, kid."

"Right, where do you want me?" David asked. Unsure of how useful he'd really be against that many aliens.

"On that gun," Miller said, pointing towards a Foxhound with no gunner. It was equipped similarly to the one he had been operating before the crash; a heavy machine gun and attached grenade launcher, which would certainly be useful against the infantry. "We'll have guys with rocket launchers to keep the enemy armour off of you as you deal with the infantry."

"Right, I've got the gun."

XX

Acrid smoke filtered in through cracks in his helmet and through the shattered visor. Bits of the visor were embedded into the cartilage that covered his face, creating deep wounds that blood oozed from. When the smoke cleared he saw what remained of his team. Two of them were dead, Quinton and Aetdos lay motionless, their bodies nothing more than charred husks. Camdros lay motionless on the other side of the small room. The only thing that gave away his being alive was the ragged breathing, his chest slowly rising and falling in long laboured intakes of air.

Adrien sat up, crying out as his entire left side lit up with pain, a raging fire burning beneath his skin. His armour was burnt and

warped, chunks were dented or missing and bits of shrapnel had been lodged into his under suit. Everything hurt and the smoke filled his lungs, causing him to cough. He had to get out of there, back to base, report what happened but a good Turian never retreated, even in the face of defeat. Then again his mission objective was currently unattainable. His only access point deeper into the facility was blocked by the damaged data stack.

He struggled to stand up, eventually managing to despite the pain in his leg. The last few moments played back in his head; the sudden burst of weapons fire, his shield depleting, the impact of the bullet, the grenade rolling in, and then the explosion. Fire, heat and an overwhelming burst of pressure had knocked him out. How long for he wasn't sure. But he was sure that he was the only one that was going to make it out of the tunnels alive. Camdros was too far gone to save, Adrien realised as he checked on his comrade, and Adrien was in no shape to carry the larger turian out of the tunnels.

He managed to crawl his way back the way they came in, past the bloodied area where the alien, the human, had been shot. The body had been carried away. He kept his eyes open as he limped through the dark tunnels, out of the facility and into the service passageway's under the city streets. His helmet had been so badly damaged he'd ditched it and was relying on only his own eyesight to keep him from getting ambushed as he made his way to the surface.

As he exited the building and stumbled out into the street he was hit with a rush of cold air in the darkened city streets. Snow and hail swirled about in chaotic vortexes through the deserted streets of the alien city, leaving Adrien confused and disorientated as he tried to navigate the freezing wind and hostile elements surrounding him. If he was lucky he wouldn't freeze to death before he found his way back to base. Turian's weren't known for their ability to deal well in cold weather. They evolved on a warm world where cold weather like this was rare or in parts where Turians didn't live.

He stumbled into the night, hoping he made it back before he joined his team in death on this distant, alien world, far from his family. Turian's would die for the cause any day and Adrien was different but he couldn't see the cause here. There was no cause except for poor decision making.

XX

\*\*San Carlos Bay, Falkland, 2560, Sixteenth Fleet ETA; 70 hours\*\*

Small arms fire stabbed out of the snowstorm at the UNSC defenders, hidden behind the makeshift cover and hastily erected barricades or in foxholes in the road where explosives had formed creators. David let loose a barrage of fire from the machine gun atop the Foxhound near the centre of the main barricade. He used the tracer rounds to see how the wind was affecting the bullets and did his best to adjust.

The firefight started an hour ago and showed no signs of stopping despite the intensifying storm and worsening weather conditions. The alien troops were using the buildings across from where the UNSC soldiers had set up their main defensive cordon. So far neither side had gained the upper hand.

A rumbling in the street changed that.

A tank, a strange hammerhead shaped vehicle hovering above the ground using large propulsion units mounted on either side of the chassis and topped with a fifty millimetre cannon that opened fire on a group of marines near an overturned bus. The explosion sent debris and body parts scattering through the street and up into the air in a cloud of smoke and fire that turned into a small mushroomed out. One marine had been thrown clear of the blast and lay in the middle of the street, one leg gone completely and the other a mangled mess that would be amputated if the marine lived long enough.

The tank adjusted its aim to face David in the Foxhound. David aimed the gun at the tank. Bullets ricocheted off a translucent blue shield that flared to life in a display of light that lit up the surrounding area through the storm.

A rocket from a Jackhammer shot out from a position somewhere nearby and hit the alien tank. It shuddered and rocked from the force of the explosion. It seemed to falter for a moment before it righted itself and re-aimed its main gun. David didn't hesitate this time and with a surprising burst of strength and energy hauled himself up and out of the Foxhound and jumped clear just as it was engulfed in ball of flame that licked at his heels. The force of the explosion flung him several meters and through a window into a women's clothing store. Several ribs cracked with an agonising snap and crunch.

Another rocket hit the tank, this time tearing through the shield and armour, killing the crew and destroying the vehicle- eliminating the threat of the enemy armour but the fire from alien infantry seemed to double in intensity as David dragged himself out of the shop window, clutching his cracked ribs. He ran as quickly as he could, despite the pain in his chest, to some cover where two ODSs were hunkered down, periodically returning fire to keep the aliens from advancing.

A fellow ODS lay motionless nearby, a gaping wound in his chest that had punched through his titanium alloy armour and turned the inside of his chest into a meaty stew of organs and muscle. An MA5D rifle was still in his hands, clenched in a death grip.

"Take that rifle!" one ODS shouted at him as David reached their cover. It was Miller, the only ODS David knew by name. The other was the ODS medic that seemed to be everywhere. Only now she had put her helmet back on but there was a large crack running down the visor.

"But-" David tried to protest, a little shaken from his close call with death for what felt like the tenth time that day and disturbed at the idea of taking the weapon of a dead man.

"He's not going to need it!" Miller shouted back, interrupting him. David reached for the weapon, grimacing as his chest lit up in pain. He pried from the dead man's hands which had already frozen tight. "I hope you're ready for the fight of your life kid! It's going to be long one!"

"Right!" David replied, knowing he wasn't ready for a prolonged firefight. As long as neither side got the upper hand it would be a



bloody stalemate until the fleet arrived in just under three days.  
"Do we even have enough ammo for a long one?"

"We'll find out!" Miller shouted over the roar of fire and wind with what seemed like undue glee.

\* \* \*

><p><em>When those pelicans came back into the bay I had just finished helping load up ammunition into a battle scared Broadsword that raced off to clear the hanger for incoming pelicans. When they touched down they did so at speed, tearing up the landing deck in the process. Medical personnel raced to the dropships before they'd even opened the troop bays and when they started wheeling those soldiers out of there? I knew why. They were kids- not, not school kids, but just out of school- they looked younger than my own son and they were in bad shape.<em>

\_Most of them looked lifeless, covered in blood and full of tubes and surrounded by medical technicians and bandages. Limps arms hanging over the side of gurneys as medical personnel tried their best to save their lives? You don't forget images like that. Certainly not when you see it with your own eyes. \_

\_The entire way to Falkland we'd been complaining about how difficult our job was going to be, keeping the fighters and pelican's fuelled and armed, ready to dart back into the fight. After that first wave of dropships came in I realised who had the harder job. The boys and girls on the ground that had fought off an invasion without support from the rest of the UNSC for nearly a week. Hundreds had died on both side and I saw six army troopers flat line on their way out of the hanger, the doctors did their best but- but a lot of army boys and girls didn't make it. I'd served since the end of the war with the NCA and I'd seen some action against them but this was the first time I'd seen anything this intense. And this heart breaking. It made me grateful that my own son had chosen a life as a doctor and made me appreciate his job a bit more. It also made me appreciate the sacrifices of the men and women in the other services in the UNSC.

\_

\_My crew and I checked those birds before they went out again, refuelled them, and got them ready to go. Stepping into the troop bay of one of those pelicans before it lifted off to replace a fuel cell I nearly puked. Blood was everywhere, sloshing about on the floor next to discarded bandages, Medi-Gel packs and Bio-foam containers. I then understood why the old marines called it the 'blood tray'.

\_

\_Extract from an Interview with Chief Petty Officer Michael Todd, stationed aboard the UNSC \_Orion,\_ part of the Sixteenth fleet during the Liberation of Falkland as part of \_OPERATION: VANGUARD.

## 12. Chapter 12

\*\*Chapter 12!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>USNC <strong>\_\*\*Vanguard, \*\*\_\*\*Sixteenth Fleet,

The fleet arrived in a flurry of exotic particles and radiation that existed for only a brief moment before the universe reconciled itself and eliminated the foreign elements as the fleet of human warships moved away from their entry point, the Inferior Interstellar Jump Point, and moved deeper into the star system. The Superior and Inferior Interstellar Jump points were points in space, usually around a planet or on the outer edges of a solar system, which provided more suitable conditions for ships to enter or exit slipstream space. With the advances made in Slipspace navigation, and in the drives themselves, SIJPs and IIJPs became almost redundant except for when transferring large fleets of ships.

The fleet was spread out in a wide crescent shape, spreading thousands of kilometres. Each ship had come out of Slipspace in near perfect order and position.

Every ship, every Captain, every Commander, knew their job, knew their role in the plan so the fleet didn't waste time organising itself before it moved. Instead each ship pushed their engines to the red line and split off onto preassigned battle groups and squadrons.

The sole carrier in the fleet hung close to the Vanguard, using the dreadnought's massive bulk to shield it from the enemy fleet as they performed a slingshot around the gas giant at the edge of the system and headed for the bulk of the enemy fleet in orbit above the colony of Falkland.

Light from the fleet's arrival would reach the enemy fleet less than an hour before they were in weapons range which would give the aliens enough time to start an intercept course that would take them into space between Falkland and Victoria, away from Falkland's orbit where destroyed ships could fall onto the planet, potentially killing the very people the UNSC was here to save.

Admiral Indara watched as the bridge crew manned their station, communicating with each other and the other ships in the fleet in a perfectly organised, controlled manner that belied the fact that they were about to go to war. About to shed blood. Not everyone was going to make it home. It was going to be an important life lesson for these officers and sailors, nearly all of which had never even seen real combat.

George notified him when the light of their arrival reached the enemy fleet and watched as the massive bulk of alien warships as they turned to face the UNSC reprisal fleet. Soon after all the scouting flotilla's turned and moved towards and intercept vector that would allow them to join the main fleet but they were moving too slow. The sixteenth fleet was nearly on top of enemy fleet. There was just minutes left and the enemy commander was still trying to organise his fleet to better accommodate his lack of escorts. He was too slow.

"Admiral," George said, appearing with a shimmer of light on the pedestal next to Indara's command seat. They were closing on the enemy fleet fast, if George was bringing something up, he'd have to be quick. "I'm picking up UNSC transponders inside the alien ship in the centre of the formation, what I'm guessing is the alien

flagship. The signals are faint, hence why I'm just picking them up now, but it appears they belong to the command crew of the Mu, the scouting vessel that went missing not too long ago while trying to find out where all the missing transports went."

"Are you sure, George?" Indara asked, looking down at the AI's avatar.

"Yes. Without question."

"Right," Indara said. A bit louder he added, "Alter the firing solutions, bring us up alongside the flagship. Weapons, have our broadside guns take out their engines then hammer them until they stop shooting back."

A chorus of 'Aye, sir' echoed through the bridge and at the last moment the UNSC fleet altered its trajectory, splitting off into its separate battlegroups. The alien fleet was spread out in a rough rectangular shape that presented the larger, stronger ships with clear lines of fire at Basra and its battle group of destroyers and frigates. No vessel in the battle group flinched as the alien vessels opened fire. Spinal guns similar to the UNSC's own MAC systems opened fire, blue traces of light and metal shot forwards like lightning in space. Basra and the ships around her opened fire as well, yellow streaks of lightning from the MAC systems and feathery exhaust trails from Archer and Trident missiles crossed the gap between the fleets.

The Vanguard was using Basra's combined silhouette to hide the majority of its own battlegroup which would allow for a follow up strike after the main hit. Battlegroups Lancer, Kursk, Midway and Gibraltar had split off, moving to flank the enemy from both sides, underneath and above in a vast, intricate web of crisscrossing lines that had to be spot on accurate. If it wasn't, it would mean the collision of two or more ships at speeds that would have turned all involved into molten slag. Including the crews of those ships.

Millions of tonnes of metal collided.

Then it was over.

Basra had passed through the alien fleet with flared shields. The rest of the battlegroup wasn't as lucky. Six frigates and two destroyers fell out of position, knocked off course by the sheer force of the enemy fire or they were turned into rapidly expanding clouds of debris that were white hot from the heat of the overloaded reactors.

Lancer and Gibraltar hit the enemy fleet from the sides while Kursk and Midway topped and tailed the fleet all at the same time. The smaller, more nimble alien escorts weaved in and out of fire only to be taken out as missiles tracked them through the chaos. The larger alien ships were struggling to adjust their firing lines, relying on secondary weapons systems to take on the UNSC fleet elements engaging them on all sides.

Dozens of alien ships turned into debris while others carried on their trajectories, without power, their crew dead. Less than half that number in UNSC ships had been destroyed.

Then \_Vanguard\_ hit.

The alien fleet was still reeling from the blows by the rest of the fleet, now \_Vanguard\_ and her escorts, including a carrier, protected by a swarm of fighters, clashed with what remained. The \_Vanguard\_ was the only one to slow down, only for the briefest of moments, to hammer the alien flagship from just kilometres away.

By the time the dreadnought moved away the enemy flagship was in ruins. Entire decks were exposed to vacuum and chunks of armour the size of houses were sheared off. Each individual battlegroup swung about in wide arcs, clear of the alien vessels rushing to support the stricken fleet near Falklands orbit.

The UNSC fleet turned about to face the alien fleet again.

Indara didn't take his eyes away from the tactical display. The crew was Captain Coombs's. Not his. He'd let the Captain keep an eye on the ship and crew. They were all covered in sweat, from the nerves of combat, the rapid fire movement they did just to keep the ship and weapons running under the strain of combat. A conduit overloaded in a dull explosion that showered flames and sparks on a crewman trying to his best to put out another fire.

Indara tapped the Alpha channel, connecting his flagship to every other ship in the UNSC fleet.

"Concentrate fire on those forward heavy's, let your deck guns and missiles handle the smaller targets." Indara said over the fleet channel. He switched the COM to contact Major Olmos, commander of the ODSF forces stationed on the \_Vanguard\_.

"What do you need Admiral?" Olmos asked as his face appeared on the COM screen.

"I need you to get two teams ready for a boarding action. There's UNSC transponders on the alien flagship and I want to know why. And, if possible, capture the alien command crew."

Olmos didn't hesitate.

"Understood, admiral. We'll get it done. I'll work with George in organising this op. How long do we have?" Olmos was already working on a COM pad, organising a team for the mission.

"Not long, we'll be passing them again in a minute," Indara cast a quick glance at the tactical display. "Thirty minutes. Have your men ready then, Major." Olmos nodded in response.

"Understood, admiral. They'll be ready." The screen shut off and Indara watched as the two fleets turned around. The UNSC fleet in wide, separate arcs that intercepted through the alien fleet again while the aliens were moving all of their vessels in unison, using the lone remaining cruiser as a guide ship.

The ship rolled and twisted as it manoeuvred to bring itself about to face the enemy fleet again. The MAC guns were charged and ready, missile pods were open and the deck guns were loaded and ready.

**\*\*San Carlos Bay, 2560\*\***

Nearly three days of almost continues fighting. They'd been pushed back from barrier to barrier until they were fighting in craters in the street outside the hospital. David was covered in snow, blood and dirt. He was cold and beginning to run on empty.

He leant out from the bullet ridden cover he'd been hiding behind and went to fire a steady burst at the alien silhouette. Two rounds spat out at the invader before the rifle clicked. David pulled the trigger again and again. Only to hear the same click. It was empty and he had no more ammunition left at all. Thirty metres ahead of him Miller and the ODSF medic, Vanessa Hart, dashed from cover to cover. David dropped the empty MA5D into the snow, his hands shaking from the cold, from fear and from the depleted supply of adrenaline pumping through his veins. His breathing was rapid- bone white plumes of air burst out of his nose and mouth like ash from a volcano.

He grabbed the M6 sidearm from his thigh and levelled it at an encroaching alien figure, moving towards Miller and Hart. David fired every round in the clip and watched as the bullets tore into the alien, the semi-armour piercing high explosive rounds ripped the alien apart, and spreading blue blood into a fine mist that coated the snow as the body fell to the floor.

The rest of the ODSF squad was covering the retreat of Miller and Hart, one of them, armed with a high powered sniper rifle, was resting the weapon on the hood of a burnt out car that was riddled with bullets.

The sniper was firing as fast as the weapon and his aim would allow while one ODSF was using a M739 SAW, laying down a barrage of fire down the street towards the approaching alien infantry. The burnt out remains of the alien tanks provided the aliens with cover from the hail of bullets.

The storm had passed and dissipated, leaving the city covered in snow and ice. The dead were frozen and buried, lost to their comrades. Nearly all operations had ceased during the storm, leaving the beleaguered men and women defending the hospital stranded, surrounded by enemies and cut off from what little support Camp Moore could offer.

Miller darted for another piece of cover, closer to the remains of the defending UNSC troops. Lieutenant Hadabo was crouched nearby, issuing orders over the radio. David's pistol clicked empty, he had no more ammunition left- all of it expended. He wetted his lips and it felt like they froze and his breathing became heavier. It took him a moment to regain his senses.

"I'm out of ammo!" he finally shouted and Hadabo looked up over at him.

"Most of us are, Corporal!" Hadabo yelled back. "There's some near Miller's position, if you can reach him!" David looked out and saw what Hadabo meant; twenty metres of open ground stood between him and series of sand bags that had formed a wall until a shell from an alien tank had blown it, and two unlucky marines, up into the air. What remained had collapsed and offered only marginal protection

against returning fire from the alien troops as they slowly advanced.

A cloud of dust and debris shot out near his head and David fell back on to the ground. He scrambled back up to his feet and looked out again. Then he ran. A dead sprint across the open ground as bullets cracked through the air around him and pillars of snow billowed upwards all around him. Then he hit the low wall of snow covered sandbags, adrenaline coursing through his veins.

David grabbed some ammo and as quickly as he could he shoved it into the MA5 hanging loosely around his neck on a sling. A black figure vaulted over the cover and landed in an eruption of snow and ice. He nearly emptied the clip into the figure until he realised it was Hart, the ODS medic. An M460 grenade launcher spat out a half dozen rounds from a second floor window in the hospital, each one impacting nearby- covering them with partially melted snow and debris.

"Everyone okay?" Millar asked as the dust settled and small fragments of an alien body rained down on them.

"Yeah," David replied but Hart was silent. She lay unmoving in the snow, a red stain slowly crept outwards. She let out a groan, then a cry of agony. Miller moved to help her while David took pot shots at the alien infantry down the street or at positions where they hiding.

"Hart's down!" Miller called out over the radio. David grabbed the ammunition box and hurled it over one shoulder.

"We can't stay here! They're almost on top of us!" as if to prove the point an alien soldier vaulted over the cover and knocked David to one side, sending the ammunition spilling into the snow covered street, and levelled his gun at Miller who was still crouched over Hart and trying to turn to face the very immediate threat.

The alien fired a second long burst before David had climbed to his feet and tackled it. The burst had caught Miller in the chest and he fell back in the snow, blood seeping out of his black and grey armour. David wrestled with the alien, dressed in blue and black armour, fighting for control over the rifle and leverage. They rolled around in the snow until the rifle was sent scattering into the snow. The alien twisted and bucked, its helmet coming off in the process, until it managed to gain enough leverage to stay on top. It pulled out a serrated knife and went to bring it down into David's face. He blocked the attempt with his forearm but the alien was pushing down him with a near primal ferocity. David reached for his own knife, only to find the sheath empty- the blade had been knocked loose in the struggle and was somewhere in the snow. The alien pushed down again with renewed strength at seeing David reach for the empty sheath.

It was a wild flurry of movement as David craned his neck to avoid the blow and as the knife plunged into the slush beneath them the alien was thrown off balance which allowed David to roll over, disarm the alien, and lay a right hook into the alien's bony, cartilage covered face so hard he heard a sickening wet crunch of bones cracking and breaking. The alien was dazed but not unconscious and as David leapt for the alien rifle it got up. The grip was awkward and

didn't sit right in his hand and the trigger was at an uncomfortable angle but he pulled it down and a burst fire tore through the alien, ripping its shields off before tearing through the armour. A single round, trailed by a wispy vapour plume, split through the alien for good measure and tore it in half. Blood, bone and meaty chunks of flesh covered him from head to toe. He lay there, motionless as the realisation of what had happened- how close he'd come to death and the fact that he had seen another sentient being die.

"\_Hey, grab Miller and Hart and get back here! We're pulling out!"\_ the sniper shouted over the radio. Things had escalated quickly and without much need ammunition it was impossible for the UNSC forces to hold their position.

David had to shake himself out of the state he was in and struggle to his feet. He was sure the events of the last few days would haunt him for decades to come.

He grabbed Miller and hauled him off of Hart who was struggling with the sergeant's mass on top of her and with the bullets and shrapnel inside of her meant she failed to worm her way out. More bullets whizzed past his head as he rolled Hart over onto her back before hauling her over his shoulders.

He then ran back to what remained of the UNSC defences.

It was one of the longest twenty metres of his life.

The air cracked and snapped around him as enemy rounds soared past him and hit the snow surrounding him.

He stumbled as a bullet ripped into his arm and then another grazed his leg and something else seemed to hit him in the centre of his back just a metre from relative safety. He fell into the snow and rolled, -throwing himself and Hart back into cover. His arm burnt and his leg stung as the snow around him turned crimson.

As he lay there, the world edging away from him, walls of blackness creeping in, his breathing growing ragged, he saw something- a gunship. An AV-22 Sparrowhawk roared in from above and opened up with its auto cannons. It pushed forwards from the hospital, routing out the aliens and eliminating them. Moments later a pelican swooped in and landed amid the wreckage and chaos, emblazoned with the symbol for the 34th Naval Air Squadron, a whirlwind of slushy snow was thrown up into the air with the engines backwash. He felt someone shake him and grab him before Lieutenant Hadabo appeared in his diminishing field of view. Breathing was difficult and painful. A corpsman appeared and he felt himself being hauled up before the darkness surrounded him and engulfed his conscious mind.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Remember that reviews are love! <strong>

\*\*I apologise about the sporadic nature of updates but with my hours at work increasing and my moving of house its been a miracle I've gotten anything done at all. \*\*

\*\*Also, one last thing for anyone whose interested; a couple of story ideas I've had for a few months now.\*\*

**\*\*One:** A halo/starwars cross set millenia into the future of the halo universe, long after Humanity has ascended and taken guardianship of the mantle. The main character discovers the events of the Clone wars happening outside of Human controlled space. (Message me if you want more details or if you or someone you know is interested in writing or co-writing this!)

**\*\*Two:** A Destiny/Mass Effect cross that follows a fire team of Guardians as they enter a Vex gate on Mars and end spread through out the galaxy. The hunter, the sole survivor of the Vault of Glass, joins Shepard and her Crew while the Titan wreaks havoc in the Terminus systems and the Warlock starts uncovering the mysteries of the Reapers and the Mass Relay Network. (Once again, message me for details!)

### 13. Chapter 13

**\*\*Chapter 13, yay!\*\***

**\*\*San Carlos, Falkland, 2560\*\***

Sarah Hopkin stared out of the small view port in the back of the massive Albatross dropship as it made its approach into Firebase Diamond- the forward operating base for UNSC marines an army personnel operating in the city, fighting the remaining alien resistance. That was why she was here. To see the brave men and women of the UNSC as they engaged this new, alien threat and she wanted to see it from the front lines, not safely nestled somewhere far behind the front at Camp Moore. Jason Ramos, her camera-drone controller and co-worker sat next to her, both of them dressed in ballistic protection vest, blue stripes running down their sides marked them as journalists, though Sarah was almost certain that the aliens wouldn't know the difference and would probably shoot them as well. It was a risk. A risk well worth it.

The marines, all cramped in full combat loads and laden with heavy packs full of kit and gear. Most of them looked like kids straight out of high school, most of them were, and the few older marines, the ones with rank, looked weary but alert. The marines, in an attempt to keep busy, checked their weapons, a symphony of preparatory clicks and snaps that echoed in the confines of the troop bay. Some of them gave Sarah and Jason sidelong looks that spoke of mistrust. It made sense, the marines' distrust of her, as reporters had been a constant worry, and target, during the war with the NCA. The young marines here didn't see why this conflict would be different.

They talked amongst themselves, nervous chatter mostly, about anything and everything. Family back home, partners, anything to take their mind of the hostile conditions they were flying into. It helped ease their minds.

They flew over the twisted, burnt out remains of the city, darting through pillars of smoke and ash as they skimmed over the surface of the towers before swooping low in a gut churning dive into Firebase Diamond, near the riverside hospital. Only two days ago the streets surrounding the hospital had been a bloody battle that had nearly ended in a UNSC defeat and would have pushed them back across the river, splitting the city in two. It was a battle that was already



going down in history. Her sources in the military channels, the same ones that had gotten Sarah this posting, were talking of several stories of acts of daring and bravery that hadn't been seen since the start of the war with the NCA. It was awe inspiring to hear the tales of the brave few that had survived and sobering to hear of those that didn't. When they touched down in a flurry of snow and dirt the marines piled out with practiced precision and fanned out. Before them was the marine colonel in charge of operations out of the firebase. As the marines formed up in front of the Colonel, Sarah and Jason grabbed their duffel bags and headed down the ramp and into the street. Most of the snow surrounding the landing site had either been shovelled away or melted into a slushy sheet of sleet.

The colonel motioned a stern looking major towards Sarah and Jason while he addressed the new marines.

"You must be the damn reporters we're hosting until this thing is over," the major said with a distasteful frown. He didn't seem angry at them, merely at his orders for dealing with them. He didn't offer his hand to them either, merely leaving them at rest by his sides.

"Yes, I'm Sarah Hopkin, from Waypoint Nine, and this is Jason Ramos, my system operator. I do the show, he makes sure people see it." She said with the same charming smile she had used when interviewing some of the most powerful people in the UNSC like Lord Hood and Admiral Stanforth. It was her million credit smile. And the major didn't seem the least bit bothered. In fact, Sarah could have sworn his frown grew deeper. "Can I just say it really is a pleasure to be here and I just want to thank you and your men for letting us be here?"

"Yeah I know who you are, your damn face is all over the Waypoint channels." The Major let out a sigh before continuing. "I get why you're here and why the brass decided it was a good idea for you to document this, but, if you pose a danger to the men and women under my command, I will have you removed from forward operations. At the end of the day we have a job to complete, much like you, and we can't afford to coddle you in the process, understand?"

"Of course, major. This isn't my first foray into field reporting, you know? I was there at Callista, Andesia, Tribute and Elysium City. I know how to handle myself." Sarah replied, sounding \_almost\_ offended.

"Yeah, I've seen some of your documentaries about the war. But the marines and our mission is our priority. Just keep to the side lines and you'll be fine."

"Understood, Major."

"Good, now, if the aliens attempt to capture you Intel suggests that they won't skin you alive but that doesn't mean you'll be treated humanely. If at all possible don't get captured alive. Now that's done we can move on. If you'll follow me please." The major showed them into the hospital and into a converted barracks where they'd be staying. They would be briefed properly shortly, after they settled into the blood stained beds and bare rooms, cleared out to make a somewhat clean living space.

Then they could start some of the in-field interviews.

**\*\*Alien Dreadnought, 105\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* ODSB Battalion, 2560\*\***

The SOIEV impacted the alien armour in a bone jarring crash. Magnets in the base of the pod activated, while sharp clamps ripped into the armour, preventing the pod from ricocheting into deep space. The hatch exploded out and Staff Sergeant Ryan Groves unstrapped himself from his crash seat, grabbed the M7 submachine gun and M48 automatic shotgun from their holds next to his seat, strapped them to his armour and extracted himself from the insertion pod. His HUD fizzled and cracked with static and then steadied out, highlighting his squad in green and the rest of the platoon in blue. Major Olmos was coordinating the attack from the *\_Vanguard*, *\_several million kilometres away by now*, while Captain Kerry McKenzie led the charge.

She had her team organising around a breach in the armour, a gaping hole ringed by twisted metal and jagged edges from broken struts and hull bracings. Ryan and his team moved in towards her. A flight of modified Sparrowhawk's kept watch over the group as they made their way into the crippled alien ship. By the time they were all there McKenzie's team had set up ropes so they could safely repel down. The servers and motors in his suit whined and hissed silently in the vacuum as he moved closer to the hole into the vessel.

It took minutes for them to all to get inside the ship and to secure their location. Lieutenant Faulkner, their ONI attachÃ©, was tasked with getting through the alien encryption to get through the doors and move deeper into the ship. To do that he had a very powerful asset. An AI. Not a top of the line, ultra-valuable like ones used on UNSC flagships or the incredible Warwind AIs on Reach. Its sole purpose was to hack through encryption codes, even ones in another language.

When door finally slid open Groves expected a hail gunfire and powerful rush of air escaping into space. Nothing came. It was eerily quiet. Groves took his men on point and moved forwards into the hall beyond. It was empty. Bits of debris knocked loose during the brief contact with the UNSC dreadnought floated about, weightless in the damaged sections of the ship where artificial gravity had been damaged beyond repair. The aliens had abandoned it, retreated deeper into the ship. That suited Groves just fine. In the darkened halls of the alien ship they split up. The Captain and her men were heading for the IFF tags deep in the heart of the ship while Groves led him and the ONI officer towards what was believed to be the command centre so they could insert the AI, gather as much information as possible, take possession of the sips systems long enough to get everyone out and, if possible, capture any surviving command crew.

He led the way through the ship and in the third or fourth compartment they found the first dead aliens, burnt and mangled beyond any form of recognition- killed by an explosion from a missile that tore out a chunk of the alien command ship. They moved past them, weapons ready, fully alert- ready for anything.

In the next hall as they rolled around a corner they found their first living alien, four of them, armed with rifles and ready for the ODSBs as they exposed themselves. Bullets clattered against his armour, forcing Groves back into the man behind him and back around

the corner. Nothing had penetrated his armour but he could feel his chest bruising and his chest plate was dented and scarred.

"Damn it, Staff," the man under him grunted out. "Your misses is right, you need to lose some weight."

"Yeah? At least I make a good bullet sponge otherwise you'd be splattered all over that wall." Groves said as he hauled himself back to his feet. The ONI liaison moved closer to the edge of the corner. The aliens had stopped firing, waiting for the marines to poke their heads out again.

They were pinned on one side of a T-junction. The aliens were defending the way deeper into the ship from the stem while the ODSs were cornered on one side of the cross.

"Faulkner!" Groves growled lowly. "How good is your sensor suite?"

Behind his visor the ONI attachÃ© looked offended, then he frowned.

"The best, why? What are you thinking, Sergeant?" Faulkner replied.

"Can you ping the walls? Find us a quick way around these guys, let us flank them?" It took him a minute to pull up a scan of the walls and corridors surrounding them. The ONI officer patched Groves' HUD into the feed. Just on the other side of the junction was a maintenance hatch that would allow two fully armoured marines to squeeze through to another hatch located behind the alien defenders.

"Casey, stay here keep the damn aliens busy. Carter, you're with me." Groves said over the TEAMCOM. They moved to the edge while Faulkner moved back. Casey and another marine popped out of cover, one high, one low, and let out a barrage of fire with their automatic submachine guns while another bounced a smoke grenade off the wall into the hall with the aliens. Seconds later the hall was covered in a thick grey smoke that blocked all sight. Even infrared. Groves and Carter sprinted across the gap and made it to the other side without a shot being fired at them. Groves began prying off the sealed hatch to the maintenance causeway, using his suits hydraulics to apply enough force to rip it off its hinges and throw it clear.

"Casey, make enough noise to keep those aliens from hearing us clatter our way through this!"

"Roger that, staff!"

A symphony of horrendous clacks and cracks, whistles of death and misery, erupted behind him, muffled slightly by his helmet. He forced himself into the narrow passage, tucking his SMG away and pulling out his shotgun. He had to skim along hunched over, bracing himself in his knuckles. He moved along through the passageway like a chimpanzee running across the ground. Quickly but not quietly. He just hoped the steady reports of gunfire were loud enough to drown out the noise he was making. If not when he burst out the hatch on the other side he wouldn't have long to regret his choice.

He crashed open the hatch with his shoulder, rolled out and readied his weapon. The aliens were just around the corner, oblivious to the two UNSC ODSTs flanking them. The two ODSTs, armed with fully automatic shotguns and equipped with the element of surprise, made short work of the aliens. Blue blood pooled beneath the metal grating that made up the floor of the ship and splashes of it covered the makeshift cover and walls around them. It was horrendous. And He'd seen worse. All ODST NCOs had seen worse. The Alliance were brutal to prisoners of war. More so than ONI led the public to believe.

ONI didn't censor it to protect the Alliance but to keep the idea that the war was relatively clean. If people really knew what happened to POWs or on the battlefield then recruitment numbers would drop dramatically. Then again, until a few days ago, the UNSC saw that as a good thing. There had been no more war to fight.

His squad regrouped before pushing deeper into the alien vessel. So far it had been too easy and Groves tried to ignore the knot in his stomach that told him something was amiss.

When the heavy blast doors slid open revealing the path forward, the knot unravelled. The aliens were ready and waiting. And there was no easy way to flank them this time.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Cliffhanger, yay! <strong>

\*\*Also please, please check out this piece of work;  
s/3255092/1/Victoria, a link will be available on my profile. It's an original piece I've been working on for a little bit so leave a comment on there as to what you think, or message me directly. It would mean a lot to see what people think of it. \*\*

## 14. Chapter 14

\*\*Hello everyone, I just want to take a moment to say thank you all for reading this story of mine and for continuing to read it. I know that I don't update regularly and that I have tendency to start writing new stories and abandon old ones but I thank you for all the support, criticism and reviews. \*\*

\*\*Now, on to something else- I'm not one to beg but the last chapter only seven people bothered to leave a comment. Less than half that of the previous chapters. Guys and girls? If you've got time to read the chapter, to favourite and follow the story, nine times out of ten you've got time to leave a little something in the review section. This entire website is about sharing our stories with the world, stories about the worlds we all love. No writer on this website can improve if no one is willing to spend a few moments telling the writer what you thought of the chapter or the story as a whole. It's really disheartening for me, and I'm sure for my fellow writers, when we spend hours of our spare time writing these for you, and we don't even get a 'good update, keep it going.' \*\*

\*\*For these stories to survive they need the readers to support them. Without that support, there's no real point in continuing to publish these stories.\*\*

**\*\*Regardless, enjoy the chapter.\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Epsilon Eridani System, Reach Military Complex,  
2560<strong>

By the time he woke up, David was in an ONI/Navy Medical station over Reach Military Complex, home of the UNSC Navy, Marine Corps, Army, Air Force and ONI. It was the most heavily defended system in the UNSC bar Sol and with the outbreak of war with the aliens, the Navy fleet had nearly trebled in size, old orbital defences, deactivated after the Colonial Civil War, were slowly being brought back online.

He couldn't see much from the bed he was in. The mattress was too soft, something he struggled to believe at first, he sunk into the bed, the side of it threatening to swallow him. There was an incessant beeping from the monitors and devices he was plugged into, a steady rhythm that, after a moment of concentration, followed his heartbeat. From his bed he could gaze out of the viewport and watch in fascination as countless stars twinkled delicately in space, like glimmering lights on a vast chandelier.

It was magnificent.

He could see the dark angular shapes of UNSC destroyers and frigates pass by in what he could only guess was a patrolling orbit that took them close, in terms of space, to the medical station. He could just about make out the running lights on distant vessels as they moved to and fro between Reach and other human colonies in the system or towards one of the designated interstellar shipping lanes that would allow them easy and permitted entry into Slipspace.

He was the sole occupier of the room, a curious thing considering the luxury of space on an orbital station like this. He looked around, the room was sparsely decorated, instead relying on the vista provided by the floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall viewport and a solitary, dark green, potted plant that drooped over sadly in one corner, resting against the viewport. There was a small closet area adjacent to the door, opposite David's bed, that he presumed led into a toilet. The only other door led out into the hall of the station, deeper into its heart.

Less than half an hour after he woke up the door to the room slid open and a doctor, wearing a tidy white coat with blue stripes on the arms walked in, glancing down at a COM pad. Only once he'd taken a step inside the room did the doctor look up. He didn't seem surprised that David was awake, the station AI had probably informed the doctor as soon as he woke up, but he smiled. It wasn't friendly, merely the bedside smile doctors used while dealing with patients.

"It's good to see you awake, Corporal," the doctor said as he closed the gap between the door and the bed quickly. He pulled up a padded seat next to the bed and sat down. "You've been unconscious since marines evacuated you from Falkland. Fleet medical personnel kept you alive, just about." The doctor spoke calmly, as if he were talking about the weather, not David's life, and with an accent he couldn't quite place.

"You're alive though, that's what matters. Now, just I'm sure you've got some questions and I will do my best to answer them. But first I need to give you a quick look over, see if there's been anything we could have missed while you were out."

The doctor spent the next hour performing various non-evasive tests to check up on David, discovering several minor injuries that had been missed. It was exhausting, all the questions, the poking and the prodding, the constant lances of pain that echoed through every fibre of his body. Even sitting up had been difficult. One of the bullets that had nearly killed him, a high calibre round that had nearly torn his spine to shreds, had gone clean through his armour and exited his chest, leaving a fist sized hole that had been covered up using bio-foam and bandages until he'd gotten to a UNSC hospital ship that fixed him during the four day journey back to Reach using patches of skin and muscle grown using his own DNA.

"So, doctor," David said after the examination ended and the doctor typed away at his COM pad. He looked up for a brief second and smiled. David winced slightly as another lance of pain shot through him, too much weight had shifted through the still sensitive and sore chest wound. "What did you mean? Earlier when you said I just about survived? What happened?"

The doctor's smile faltered, just for a fraction of a second, but David saw it.

"The sniper bullet that nearly killed you tore apart some vital organs. Doctors aboard the Wishful had to perform two major surgeries to keep you alive. Youâ€¦ how do I say this?" he hesitated a moment, sighed then continued. "You flat lined on the operating table twice. And once before they even got you there."

"Oh" David managed to whisper, more to himself than the doctor.

So I did die? Three times, nearly permanently. Yet here I am, alive. Safe and sound aboard a UNSC medical station while how many people, good people, better people than me, died? What about Taylor? Allie? Miller and Hart? The Mister of Education? Rowkin? All the marines and troopers still there, fighting the aliens on Falkland? Why am I safe and alive, light years away, when, by all rights, I should be dead? It was a sobering train of thought. And not exactly one he wanted go down anytime soon. But the guilt was there. Nestled deeply in his gut, right next to all the artificially grown organs that had replaced his damaged ones.

"Can I ask you about Chris Taylor? I was serving with him back on Falkland." What about Miller and Hart, they saved your life. "And Sergeant Miller, he was an ODST, and Vanessa Hart? Also and ODST."

The doctor visibly grimaced and looked saddened.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that. I don't know. I can tell you someone moreâ€¦ qualified to answer those questions will visit you shortly. Naval Intelligence will want to talk to you when you're up for it."

The doctor left after that. David felt numb. Not from the slightly too cold temperature of the room. He had walked side by side with

death, embraced him three times and still walked away. How many people had died on Falkland, military and civilian? He was left alone for the most part over the next few days. Only visited by nurses and the doctor looking over his recovery.

Over the next few days he sunk into a deep, guilt induced, depression. The guilt of leaving friends back on Falkland, not knowing if Taylor, Hart or Miller made it and Allie. That was the kicker. He had made that call. She should never been sent off by herself with the minister. They were both probably frozen corpses covered in snow on some nameless street or alley. He had killed them.

Five days after waking up David had managed to get semi-mobile, able to move about his small, enclosed room. He was sat in the small padded chair, facing the viewport, scrolling through the various news reports already breaking headlines throughout the UNSC and UEG. He was reading some of the released after action reports and speculations about what would be the UNSCs next course of action against the alien aggressors. Part way through a speech from President Warren he heard the door open with a hiss and a pair of crisp shoes snapping at the metal floor as the person entered.

"Lance Corporal Campbell?" It wasn't one of the nurses or the doctor. He'd already guessed that, the staff wore soft shoes that didn't make a sound as they walked. Whoever this was, they were very formal. He suddenly remembered the doctor had said ONI had wanted to speak to him when he was feeling better. He suddenly felt very sick.

David turned around to see an ONI Lieutenant clutching a COM pad close to his chest, looking immaculate in his pure black uniform. His face was blank, looking impassive but straight at David. His throat tightened.

"Yes?" his mouth was suddenly dry. He went to get up, out of respect for the officer but the lieutenant waved him off.

"No need for formalities here, corporal." The ONI officer said as he closed the gap between them, grabbing the stool, and placed it next to David before sitting down. "I'm Lieutenant Frasier. I've got a few questions about your experiences on Falkland, if you don't mind?"

\_Do I really have a choice?\_

"Of course, but I have some questions as well, hopefully you can answer them." David said. He had heard enough stories about ONI to be surprised when Frasier nodded in response.

"I'll do my best to find some answers for you." He said. "Now, corporal. Obviously the events at Falkland were traumatising and I can understand that you might not want to talk about them."

\_Was he patronising me? Or being genuinely concerned?\_

"It's fine. Honest."

"Okay, Corporal-"

"David, please. No need for formalities here, right?" David tried a small smile. Frasier didn't seem to see the humour but amended himself.

"David, some of my superiors are wondering about what happened exactly on Falkland. Your platoon were sent to retrieve several political VIPs from the parliament building, correct?" Frasier kept glancing down at his COM pad, as if reading a set of prepared questions or an after action report.

"Yes." David said, keeping his gaze steady.

"And you did secure them despite an ambush by alien infantry?"

"Yeah, we managed to get out of there in mostly one piece. One of the Foxhounds was hit by a shoulder fired rocket launcher and destroyed. One of my men, Lee Wilkins, had been hit by a sniper at the start of the firefight. He didn't make it. I tried my best to stabilise him butâ€¦" David trailed off.

"He bled out." Frasier finished. He nodded silently in response. It was a reminder of another death he was responsible. "And after you escaped the parliament? What happened?"

David looked out the viewport, looking at the vista of stars. His mind wondered back to the hectic chase through the streets. He recalled the alien gunship as it strafed them as they tried to make it back to Camp Moore. The crash and split from the rest of their platoon. How he, Taylor, Allie and the Minister had trekked into the heart of the city and then into the tunnels beneath to avoid being caught by the aliens.

"What happened then? Reports seem to indicate you split your team in half. You sent the youngest and most inexperienced trooper in your squad, in your platoon, to protect and deliver a VIP safely into UNSC hands while you and Private Taylor went to intercept a squad of alien infantry, shock troopers no less, twice in number, to prevent them from acquiring the cities AI? What made you that?"

The way Frasier phrased that question made it seem more like an accusation. Maybe it was one. One that was well deserved.

"I didn't want to. At first we were just going to leave them be. We had no intention of getting into a firefight with the aliens in the tunnels. We would have been slaughtered. But when the AI accessed my comms unit and requested help, I was torn. It was the minister that wanted us to go. She said the AI held the location of dozens of human colonies within its data banks. Including Reach and Earth. If the aliens had gotten that information, I don't want to think about what would have happened." David said, still gazing off into space. He pinned the ONI officer with a questioning glare.

"Did I do the right thing? I don't know. I did what was asked from me. I tried to complete my original objective and I failed. But when Taylor and I went to intercept those aliens, it wasn't about the people on Falkland anymore. How many people would have died when the aliens acted on the intelligence they would have gained and attacked Reach and Earth?"



Frasier narrowed his eyes and slowly lowered his COM pad.

"No one is questioning your loyalty here, Corporal. The fact that you managed to take down a full squad of alien shock troops, the same troops that were giving our ODS'Ts trouble, is remarkable."

"It was luck. They were cornered. Stuck in a small room with only one way in and out. It just took a grenade and suppressive fire. We were lucky to get the drop on them there. If they'd been ready for us, I probably would have been dead for weeks by the time someone found my body."

"Yes, that is lucky. For you. Although, you say there was four of them. The aliens. ODS'Ts securing the data centre only found three bodies. One of them survived, Corporal. In your rush to save Private Taylor you forgot to make sure they were all dead."

"Did it steal the data?"

"No, as far as we can tell. The AI says the alien was severely injured and left the facility."

"So why bring it up?"

"Because Corporal, you were willing to sacrifice two lives to secure the AI but when it came to Private Taylor you abandoned battlefield procedure and instead rushed him out of there. Why?"

"I- I don't know. I was tired, scared, injured. I wasn't thinking clearly, about the details. I just wanted to stop the aliens and get my team out of there alive. I did that in the best way I thought possible." David admitted. His voice seemed so small. At his full height he probably towered over the ONI officer. But now he had shrunk into himself.

Frasier didn't speak for a few minutes, instead deciding to type away at his COM pad. Eventually he spoke up. Thankfully he seemed to move on.

"You carried Private Taylor all the way up to street level where an ODS'T squad found you and moved you to a UNSC operating base?"

"Yes." \_Why was that important?\_

"Up six stories, while carrying him, your kit and his?" It took David a moment to answer. He hadn't realised at the time how much all that must have weighed.

"Yes." Frasier raised an eyebrow, the most expressive thing he'd done since they'd arrived.

"Impressive. And when you arrived at the UNSC operating base, what happened next." David glanced back out at the galaxy through the viewport, lost in explosion filled memories.

He recounted the next three days in every excruciating detail he could manage. Every human felled and alien killed. Every armoured vehicle that had attempted to blast its way through the defenders. Every step back. The blood soaked snow glistening in the light after the storm. Blue and red blood mixed, coating the street purple. Every

close call that had nearly killed him, David told the story, as emotionally detached as he could muster.

"Thank you, Corporal." Frasier said some time after David had finished. He typed away at the COM pad, as if talking to someone before he looked back up. "I've just filed the report. Your dedication and perseverance in the face of overwhelming circumstances are truly inspiring. My superior had told me to inform you that you, Private Taylor and Sergeant Miller are to be awarded the UNSC Legion of Honour. Congratulations."

David looked at him. Suddenly angry. He was getting a damn medal? What about the countless other men and women who would have done the very same things? He deflated quickly when he realised what else Frasier had said.

"They're alive?" Frasier didn't look mournful when he replied.

"In the case of Sergeant Miller, it will be rewarded posthumously. And yes, Private Taylor is alive and well."

"What about the others? Allison Green and the ODST, Vanessa Hart?" Frasier looked puzzled for a moment before replying.

"Private Green is still MIA. As for Corporal Hart- she's alive. Thanks to you." The ONI officer hadn't even looked down at his COM pad to find the answers but he put that detail to one side. Allie was still missing, probably dead and Miller was dead. Just like a lot of others. Frasier got up to leave, once again offering his congratulations and condolences. As he was about to leave David stood up.

"Wait, Lieutenant?" he called out. Frasier stopped mid-stride. He twisted to face David. "Can you do me one favour, while I'm stuck in here? I know I can't really ask that of you but, please, at least hear me out."

Frasier narrowed his eyes, but nodded. "It depends on what it is."

"My, dad. Can you just- just let him know I'm still alive? I've tried to tell but I can't get through to him." David gestured with his own, borrowed COM pad, as he spoke.

Frasier seemed to mull it over. Eventually, either out of pity, or kindness, or respect, he agreed.

As the door to the room slide shut David was left alone with his thoughts again. With all that had happened. All that he'd just learnt. That was dangerous. He had survived the war with the aliens on Falkland. Now he had to fight a war with the demons that haunted his every thought. It was a war that could last a lifetime.

**\*\*Alien Dreadnought, 105\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\* ODST Battalion, 2560\*\***

Bullets rained down at them from every direction. They were pinned down at the door way, peaking out for just a brief moment to try and spot the aliens before they were forced back into cover. They'd been stuck there for too long. They had to move or risk being flanked by more aliens. Sergeant Groves looked around desperately for an answer

to their problems.

"Heywood!" he called out to the heavy weapons specialist in his team. The kid was crouched opposite Groves, pinning his back to the side of the door. "You still got that Hydra?"

"Yeah, should we really use it here though, staff? We might need it to clear out the hanger later." Heywood replied. He'd pulled it off his back but made no motion to use it.

"If we don't get through here, we won't need it at the hanger!" Groves replied. "So pull your head out your ass and use it!"

Heywood did as he was told, sticking it around the corner, flinching as several bullets nearly struck him, waited for the lock on tone, and fired. Six rockets launched out, sweeping the room beyond with a hail of deadly explosions and shrapnel. In the chaos Groves, Casey and two others moved up, brandishing their M48s, tearing through the aliens shimmering energy barriers and ripping armour and flesh from the bone. The rest of his team followed them in, mowing down any stragglers.

There was a flash and thunderous crack of energy and a red mist spattered across the right side of his visor. Groves, reacting on over a decade of experience, spun right, crouched low and unloaded his weapon. An alien that had hidden behind a piece of deployed cover that jutted out of the floor, as if part of the floor, had fired off a point blank shotgun round into one of the ODSs, Sal, and had taken off most of his head- scattering his skull and brain in a fine mist that covered everything around him. Groves sneered at the alien corpse as it lay there, sprawled out, almost torn in half, on the grated floor.

He led his men deeper into the alien ship, fighting nearly every step of the way through narrow passageways and corridors. The closer they got to what was believed to be the command centre the fiercer the fighting. In the halls outside the CIC they resorted to using what explosive ordinance they had to dislodge the steadfast defenders.

A breaching charge took care of the door between them and the CIC. The remains of his team, having lost three in the fighting to the resolute defenders, stormed in on the heels of the ball of fire as it blasted away from them. They had their weapons up, ready for anything. A half dozen aliens were wielding weapons and were dispatched with lethal efficiency. Groves' bull rushed the alien in the most decorated armour, a fine silver and gold series of metal plates that caved under the weight of the fully armoured ODS. Groves wrestled the side arm away from the alien commander after he quickly realised the alien wasn't trying to shoot him, but itself.

As he scuffled with the commander on the floor of the alien command centre his team fanned out, taking out any of the aliens that resisted capture, which was most of them. Faulkner did his job. Inserting the AI and gathering everything they could from the data banks on board.

Groves eventually managed to gain leverage over the alien and use it to place a powerful right hook, amplified by his armour, across its face with a sickening crunch of bone. It stopped moving. It was still alive though.

He stood up, sweating and breathing heavily. He resisted the urge to remove his helmet, instead opting to open the face plate to allow a better flow of breathable air.

"This is Groves," he said into his radio. "CIC secure. We have POWs, looks like command staff and commander as well as full access into the ships systems." It didn't take long for Captain McKenzie to reply.

"\_Copy that. Good work." \_As she spoke he heard gunfire in the background. \_"We've got UNSC POWs from the cell block and are moving towards the hanger. Can you get the AI to clear us a path?" \_

"I'll see what we can do, captain." Groves said. He walked over to Faulkner and the terminal he'd plugged the AI into.

"Lieutenant, the Captain needs our help clearing a path to the hanger. What can you do?"

It took the Lieutenant a moment to respond as he went about accessing the ships systems. The amount of data scrolling down the screen of the COM pad he'd hooked up was dizzying. It was the AI that responded over a radio link.

"I'm still accessing ships systems but once I've done that I should be able to lock them out completely and then I'll have full control over every system in this ship. Once I've done that I'll be able to lock all the sections with the aliens in and vent all the atmosphere from those compartments."

"How long will that take?" Groves' questioned.

"It's already happening." The AI replied. A second later, before Groves could manage a surprised mumble of approval, the AI spoke again. "And done. The path should be clear. We should get moving. If any of the aliens were in vacuum rated suits they won't be affected by the lack of atmosphere."

"Right," Groves said as his visor snapped closed again. They moved quickly, the subdued aliens bound and unconscious, barely weighed them down. In half the time it took them to get into the CIC they were arriving in the hanger, just minutes behind Captain McKenzie and her team. There was four missing from her team. The rescued prisoners were all UNSC Navy, looking tired and hungry but otherwise in good shape. Better shape than Groves was expecting.

A pelican dropship squeezed into the hanger bay, missing the blocky, angular alien counterparts by mere inches. The \_Vanguard\_ was on its way back, to pick them up and finish off the remaining alien fleet elements.

It was a tight squeeze inside the pelican for all the ODSs, their rescued servicemen and the alien captives but they managed, if only just. Groves let out a small sigh of relief as the thrusters kicked the pelican out of the hanger and back into space. The entire trip back to the \_Vanguard\_ was done in silence, everyone all too aware that at any moment they could be blasted into dust.

They weren't and the pelican touched down in the \_Vanguard\_'s hanger

without incident and marines were ready to take the aliens to the brig while medical personnel took care of the recovered UNSC POWs.

Captain McKenzie intercepted him before he left the hanger. She looked worn out but in otherwise good shape.

"Good work in there, Sergeant. You and your team did a hell of a job. Those bastards are going to ONI headquarters on Reach for questioning. They'll probably never see the light of day again. It still wouldn't be enough of a punishment for them. For what they did."

"No, it won't," Groves said in agreement. "But we beat them here, we can beat them again elsewhere." She cracked a rough smile and slapped his armoured shoulder.

"You sound confident about that, Groves. This was just one battle. Don't get too cocky, Sergeant, who knows how long this fight will last." With those words she left him, exiting the hanger and heading towards the room where they'd all be debriefed and given their next assignments.

## 15. Chapter 15

**\*\*Earth, Sol System,\*\***

**\*\*October 14, 2560\*\***

He arrived home on Earth in time to watch as the massive carrier Lancaster settled into the docks of Sydney harbour, its massive engines flaring and spraying clouds of water over curious bystanders gathering on the nearby bridges and waterfront walkways. Marines and navy servicemen and women gathered on the secluded dock, away from the curious eyes of the public, all dressed in dark dress uniforms, solemn and emotionless they gathered about. Only senior officers and family members talked quietly between themselves. An army general moved through the crowd, offering his condolences to the families of the troopers lost on Falkland.

The dark grey clouds opened up, rain poured over the gathered crowd. David watched from the small group of army personnel near the gangway that lowered to the dock as blank faced soldiers carried the dead down and into the awaiting transports. It was a sad sight to watch the caskets lowered into the back of hearses. Most of them empty. Each one was covered in the flag of their respective service; Army, Navy, Marines, ODS and Air force. And these were just the casualties from people born on Earth. All across UNSC space, the same scene was unfolding on dozens of different colony worlds.

Out of the corner of his eye David saw a reporter, with a camera hovering over his head, silent and head lowered. The camera panned over the procession and the groups of servicemen and women and settled on the group of army soldiers, watching their blank faces for any hint of emotion. There was none. Inside, at least for David, his emotions were dull as the sky and the grave face they all put on for this occasion.

The feelings inside of him, the entire world around him, seemed so

distant. He felt removed from it all. His hands never stopped shaking, there was always a nervous quiver in them even as he tried to eat or sleep, and his appetite seemed to vanish. There was also the nightmares. The same one, over and over again. Stuck in the snow covered streets of San Carlos, alone and at night. He would stumble about through the empty streets and buildings until he ended up at the street outside the hospital. He'd find the bodies of everyone he knew from Falkland there, half buried in the snow, dead, before he woke up. It was always the same.

After the last of the dead had been loaded into the vehicles and a few words had been said to remember them by, David slipped away into the surrounding harbour. Away from the solemn group of people. Away from the crowds and questions and looks of sympathetic understanding.

They didn't understand! They knew nothing of what happened there. Only watered down stories published by ONI to give the public the slightest hints of what happened there. And to tell them humanity had won.

As he walked aimlessly through the streets of Sydney his newly presented Purple Heart and Legion of Honour shimmered and sparkled as the bright lights of the city attempted to inject a touch of light and cheer into the grim overcast. He kept his head down but he could feel the stares of awe and wonder of the civilians surrounding him as they looked at the medals on his chest and gave him extra room to walk. No one said anything to him for his entire walk.

Thunder rumbled in the storm over Sydney and for one terrifying moment David was back on Falkland, on the snow covered streets of San Carlos as the trio of alien vessels unleashed an act of destruction upon the city. Thunderous explosions and gunfire surrounded him. Then it was gone again. He shook his head clear and hurried back to his hotel.

He packed his bag, hailed a cab and hurried for the airport. He caught the next flight home. He had two weeks leave and he planned on spending it among old friends and family. Maybe try and get over the flashes of what happened and the nervous jitters before he had to answer back to the UNSC.

Before the end of the day he was in the local bar he would visit constantly while growing up. One of his oldest childhood friends now owned it. That was why he was there in the dimly lit, open and quiet bar. A few people were sat on tables in the restaurant, on the other side of the building. Only two members of staff were present, stood at the corner of the bar, talking between themselves. When he walked in they cast him a curious look and David realised he was still in his dress uniform from the event that morning in Sydney.

He sat in a corner away from everybody, pulled out his COM pad and checked his messages. There was nothing out of the ordinary except for a single message from his father. He left in for now. That was something he wanted to deal with at another time. He sent a quick message to his friend and tucked his Com pad away. Moments later his friend came out from the back office behind the bar.

"David!" his friend exclaimed with open arms. "When I heard the news reports about Falkland I was worried about you, man."

"Yeah, it was bad. Worse than they made it out to be. I spent two days guarding a highway into the city, waiting for any advance by the aliens and to move any fleeing civilians into San Carlos because it was still safe." David started. He looked his old friend in the eye, trying to tell him how much he hurt, without saying anything.

"Doesn't seem too bad then," his friend joked.

"Tim, three alien ships descended over the city and deployed an army to wipe out anyone who resisted. We were called in to move a bunch of politicians out of the city. We got there, started moving them when one of my men, some colony kid, was shot. I told him to wait with the vehicle and keep the gun ready and because of that a damn alien shot him in the throat."

Tim offered a comforting hand as David relived every horrible moment of his brief conflict with the aliens on Falkland.

"I held him in my arms as we bolted out of there. He died and I was left covered in his blood, knowing I'd fucked up and gotten him killed."

David told him everything. Each bloody fight, crawling through the tunnels under the city like rats as they tried to escape. How he'd probably gotten Allison and the minister killed by sending them off by themselves and how he'd nearly gotten himself and Taylor killed by taking on the alien shock troops in the data centre. How he carried Taylor back to the street just in time to find an ODSST squad on their way to the Hospital rally point.

"Look, David, what happened- it wasn't your fault. I'm no military man but I don't doubt that anyone else would have made the same choices you did. You're alive and home and so are a lot of other people! Be happy about that and from the sounds of it you stopped the aliens getting their hands on stuff that could have led them to other colonies. You prevented other invasions. That alone probably saved millions of lives." Tim said, trying to comfort him.

"I know. I just- it's difficult to think that people I knew, people I cared about, died. Because of me. And then we had to defend the hospital. The aliens were trying to force us across the river. The hospital was one of the last places we were clinging onto that side of the river. Damn bugs didn't stop for three days. Heck they were still coming at us when the fleet arrived. I watched a Sparrowhawk fly in and tear them to shreds. The bugs retreated after that."

Tim lay a gentle hand on David's shoulder in a sign of support. They'd been friends for years. David's first job before he joined the Army had been at the bar they were currently sat in thanks to his friend.

"I have nightmares, every night, about what happened. I feel useless, powerless. Like I don't belong where I am. It's hard to forget what happened." David said. He felt ready to burst. He hadn't slept properly in weeks and the constant reminders of the events at Falkland haunted him.

"You don't forget," a new person added. Neither of them had noticed

the woman come up behind them as they were talking. David spun round and was confronted by the last woman he expected to see on Earth. Vanessa Hart. "You just accept it and move on. Learn from what happened, become a better person from it, if you can."

Tim shot a look at Hart as she took a step closer and then back at David. He frowned pinned David with a curious glare.

"Friend of yours?"

"Something like that," David replied. He offered her a small, half-hearted smile. Unlike David she was dressed in civilian clothes, looking comfortable and at ease. She looked nothing like the hard-ass ODS from Falkland.

"You know I saw you at the event in Sydney earlier. I tried to grab you after it finished but you bolted off before I got the chance. It's not easy tracking people across a planet. I had to call in a favour to find you." She said. She spoke like nothing out of the ordinary had happened in the last few months. She sounded like they had known each other for years.

"I just wanted to get away from it all. I've been given leave for a couple weeks. I wanted to make the most of it and get away from anything UNSC for a while." David said with a slight shrug. He couldn't hide the red in his cheeks, he'd nearly burst into tears a moment ago and still felt like he was about to. But the woman that had saved Taylor's life, the woman whose life he had saved, didn't seem to care.

"Even though there is a couple of major UNSC bases here? I mean there's that massive airfield up north, the Navy yard in the south and the Army Headquarters in the city in the south east." Hart joked. "I get it, don't worry. You should have seen me after my first deployment in Elysium City."

Tim moved aside and offered her a seat. If she was going to join them she might as well get comfortable.

"So what made you track him half way across Earth?" Tim asked. It wasn't an accusation of anything. Merely a friend looking out for him.

"I only wanted to say thanks- for dragging me out of there on Falkland. I owe you one. And I saw how it affected you, the siege. Even I could see you needed a pep talk. Plus, I wanted to tell you that if you can get over what happened I've put in a recommendation for you to the ODSs. You'd make a goddam good one." She stood up, patted his hands gently and started to move. "Think about it. I've got to go, HIGHCOM has got me running on another op already. It's a big one, could change things for everyone in the galaxy." She offered a smile, waved goodbye and left again.

"Huh," Tim said after she left. "I think you're in there my good friend." Tim laughed.

"Nah, that'll probably be the last I see of her. Unless I call in that favour." David waved his friend off. Tim laughed harder.

"Man, she tracked you half way across the world just to say that? No



way. You are in there!" Tim grabbed David's shoulders and tried to shake him, to make him see the nearly perfectly obvious. "Come on, let's get you so drunk you can't remember anything! It'll keep your mind off things!"

Tim escorted David to the bar and started the long process of drinking him under the table. By the end of the day they were too drunk to remember their names, what they did for a living and anything that happened. For the first time in weeks David slept in relative peace.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>I'm not too happy with how this chapter ends but I do need to move the story along. One more chapter and we'll be moving forward a few years and find out what happens later on in David's life.<strong>

## 16. Chapter 16

**\*\*UNSC Diplomatic Shuttle \*\*\_\*\*Armstrong,\*\*\_\*\* 2560\*\***

The gentle hum of the life support systems and slight rumble from the engines seemed strangely distant in the small luxury ship. Deep cushioned chairs lined either side of the passenger compartment, surrounding a low oval bar filled with a rainbow coloured selection of liquors lit up by a slowly changing coloured backlight.

The Ambassador, Olympia Vale- an ONI operative turned UEG ambassador, sat on a wide couch like seat facing away from the small group of ODSs assigned to her protection detail. Her gaze shifted between the data pad in her hand and the small view port showing the swirling lights of FTL travel.

The half dozen ODSs assigned to her protection detail merely traded jokes- keeping their minds off the mission at hand. They knew what they were doing, they didn't need to go over the plan again and again. Vanessa Hart sat near the door to the cockpit, her back to the partition, looking over the mission details. She still joined in on the banter, teasing the youngest of the ODS group.

She was looking over the small amount of information they'd been given on the alien capital. It was a massive space station, easily twice or three times the size of the Far Gone colony platforms and inhabited by millions all from the different races in the known galaxy. They were going into the heart of not one alien civilization, but a dozen. The implications of what would happen if things went wrong was staggering.

The ship shuddered, the hiss of life support fluttered and the Slipspace drive whined as it powered down. The view from the small windows changed to show the vast amount of stars and bands of white that marked the centre of the galaxy- the heart of the universe, as far as Vanessa was concerned. The view was clouded a moment later by a white fog of gasses as they moved into the nebula that housed the alien Citadel. She couldn't see them but Vanessa knew there were four UNSC destroyers, ships of the line with enough firepower and armour of a light cruiser and the manoeuvrability of a frigate. They could dish out a lot if hurt and take a lot of punishment in return. They

were the perfect choice for escort vessels.

Ambassador Vale stood up and smoothed non-existent creases out of her suit, a darker version of a UNSC navy officers command uniform, emblazoned with only the crest of the UEG. There were no medals or golden bars indicating rank. She quickly sorted her shoulder length brown hair and made a beeline for the cockpit. The door separating the lavish passenger compartment from the cramped cockpit.

Vanessa turned her head to get a look inside and saw every available surface was fitted with display readouts and that Vale began to float upwards before she steadied herself on the back of the pilot's chair. The two crewmembers were strapped into their seats.

"Open up a full spectrum channel. Use the encryption software and translation packages from the alien cruiser. I don't want every alien in the system to know what we're saying. Not yet anyway."

Vale spoke with a detached calmness that made it seem like she wasn't really there and that she didn't care. It was unsettling to think the future of every race in the galaxy would change depending on one woman and how she acted over the course of the next few hours.

The co-pilot leant over and clicked on the necessary switches that swapped the COM system from the closed UNSC encrypted signals to a separate line. He handed her a small earpiece from the control station and nodded to her. They were live. She cleared her throat.

Moments later, Olympia Vale made history.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>URNA, New York<strong>

It was a strange feeling, being here on the outskirts of one of the largest cities on Earth where his father lived. His father was a politician, he liked to think he mattered and the wide open estate he lived in proved it. He stood at the gate, a hundred metres from the building itself and waited for the security guard to run his ID and let him through.

The man returned, handed his ID back and opened the gate. The man had probably checked in with David's father before letting him through but as his boots crunched over the neat gravel drive as he neared the house. It looked more like a prison, David realised. Security was tight, camera's and guards everywhere. He counted them, only half a dozen, but still a lot considering they were there to protect one man. Not even a family. Just a single old man.

He entered the main doors and stepped into the lobby, a wide marbled room that sprouted off into various halls and corridors. A large stair case wound its way up onto the next floor. Someone appeared out of a hall off to his left, a tidy looking man with strong features and neatly groomed black hair with the barest hints of grey.

He smiled politely and left without saying a word. His father was following close behind him. He stopped and looked at David, he paused, looked him over and seemed to struggle for a moment.

They last time he had seen his father he had just graduated basic training, looking formal and smart. Now he looked like a haggard bum.

"David," his father choked out. His father had always been distant. Gone before he even really remembered him and always somewhere else. "I am \_so \_glad to see you're all right."

David managed a weak, awkward smile. He didn't \_feel\_ alright. He barely felt anything.

"I had a lot of help from a lot of people. Some of them aren't here anymore."

"I really am so sorry, David. I can't imagine how you're feeling right now."

"Everyone I served with is presumed dead, except for one lad who's fighting for his life aboard a hospital ship over Reach because I fucked up and nearly got him killed." David felt his face swell, his eyes filled with tears. "Three days in snow and blood. The only thing you really hear is the sound of gunfire and of men and women \_dying.\_"

"Their deaths, David, aren't your fault. Wars kill people. It's an unfortunate reality. Don't let this destroy you, David. Come on, let's get something to eat. You look starved." His father tried to comfort him.

David was so angry, so upset, and so \_glad \_to be alive to see his family again. No matter how awkward it was. He let his dad fuss over him in the weirdly detached way he always did things. He took what time he had with his father to try and form some sort of bond that meant \_something.\_ If he had learnt one thing from Falkland it was this: every moment could be your last. Make the most of it. So he was damn well trying.

He kept his decision to transfer to the ODSTs a secret. He wanted to tell Chris Taylor first. Hopefully get him to join up with him.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Three Months Later<strong>

Lieutenant Adrien Victus tried to hide his nervous fidgeting beneath the wide polymer table that dominated the room. He was the lowest ranking Turian in the room. Not just in terms of military rank either. General Fedorian and the Primarch of Palaven as well as a half dozen other Generals and Admirals all sat around the table.

Fedorian was the closest thing Adrien had to a friend in the room but that could change very quickly. The Hierarchy was in trouble. During the brief war with the humans three months ago the balance of power in the galaxy had changed. The Hierarchy had lost an entire fleet with nothing to show for it. The entire war had had been for nothing. The Hierarchy didn't like fighting wars for nothing. Especially when they lost.

Victus had led a shock troop platoon into the fight, one of the first

Hierarchy troopers to engage in combat with the humans and was the only surviving member of his platoon. He had lost a lot of good men on the human world. He had dragged himself through miles of freezing weather and snow to get back the Hierarchy lines, mere hours before they collapsed and surrendered.

Now he was back on Palaven to answer for what happened.

"Lieutenant," Fedorian began. "Recent events are bringing to light some topics that cannot be ignored. The conflict with the humans around Relay 314 is the most obvious at the moment. What happened?"

It was an open question. When dealing with high ranking officers like the men and women at the table open questions were dangerous.

"We were patrolling the sector as per our usual operating procedure. A flotilla came across the active relay, which until recently had been inactive as per citadel laws, and investigated. They encountered a small detachment of humans on the other end operating a research station. They had only one light frigate as security which took up a defensive position. I can only guess what happened after that. My platoon and I were aboard Imperial Eclipse in another system when we heard about it. I can only assume communications were attempted and failed. Resulting in a skirmish at the Relay. The flotilla was badly damaged. Only the Heaven survived. The humans were dealt with."

Victus swallowed hard. He felt like he heard it echo in the room, over the complete silence. He had dropped onto the alien world, boarded one of their ships, and killed dozens of humans in the span of only a few hours, without feeling even remotely nervous. As he crawled through the snow covered streets of the human city, he had felt fear and pain and anger. But this was different. He would leave this room alive. He might not leave it as a citizen though. As a man. That scared him. He would lose everything if that happened.

"The Admiral ordered the fleet to re-group and head through the relay. There was whispers of FTL travel completely unlike anything we use in Citadel Space. And the fact that a single light frigate by our standards was able to take on a flotilla and kill everything but a heavily damaged cruiser-" Adrien stopped himself, weighed out what he was about to say in his head, and then went for it.

"I think the Admiral and General wanted not only to get revenge for the loss of the flotilla, which was foolhardy, but to also try and acquire the new FTL and weapons technology for themselves. To improve their standing within the Hierarchy and Turian standing in the galaxy."

There was a painfully long era of silence as they took in what he said. He had accused two flag officers of being incompetent but also putting their needs and desires above the Hierarchy. Every turian was taught from birth that the Hierarchy came first, individuals came last. He had basically accused them of being traitors. Or idiots.

"And then?" The Primarch of Palaven broke the silence. His voice

seemed to carry so much weight to it that Adrien could \_feel \_it. Even though he spoke with barely a whisper.

Adrien swallowed hard again.

"We searched the immediate area around the Relay, looking for any information about the humans. We came across several small transport vessels in an outlying system, passing through a refuelling station or something similar, maybe a colony station. We didn't get too close. We took out and boarded several of the transports. They were all automated. The Admiral destroyed the station at range. No warning. I have no way of guessing his intent with a strike like that."

"To keep them quiet. They probably knew \_someone \_was out there grabbing the freighters. He probably wanted to keep the fleet as hidden as possible until he was ready." A General whose name Adrien didn't know spoke up.

"We moved to another system. It was uninhabited but the location of a binary star system. From what we could gather the humans were traveling there on some sort of tour. Possibly religious in nature but I doubt it."

"What make you say that, Lieutenant?" Fedorian spoke up.

"We boarded the only ship in the system before it left. It \_looked \_like a cruise liner. For aliens at any rate. It didn't have a religious feel to the dÃ©cor, sir."

"Are you certain?" The Primarch asked.

"As certain as I can be when talking about aliens I have never encountered before, sir."

"What happened to the cruise liner? The humans want to know. They've been pressuring us for answers since day one of the negotiations."

\_Negotiations\_ was a loose term. It was more of a power play than anything. The Council was scared of the humans. They could go anywhere in the galaxy with a military equal in size to the Hierarchy's. That rendered a lot of old defensive strategies moot. And \_that\_ scared the Council. They didn't cope well with change. And the humans were changing a lot of things.

"The General personally saw to it there were noâ€¦" he struggled for the word. "\_Witnesses.\_ He and a select few went aboard and made sure of it. There were no humans of particular importance aboard the ship except for the engineers running it. The General and Admiral wanted them alive. Everyone else was killed. A team was ordered to remove the FTL drive so it could be taken back to the Hierarchy for study. After several aborted attempts and the disappearance of part of the team the General ordered it destroyed."

"What happened to the team? Why did they abort?"

"The FTL device was still powered up, despite its inactive state. Space around the device wasâ€¦ \_weird,\_ sir. Radiation and electromagnetic distortions made working on it difficult and the

humans seemed unwilling to help. When a few of the men trying to disconnect the device began their work they vanished. Right of thin air. One second they're there and then they're gone. They disappeared."

That caused discontent mumbling throughout the room. Fedorian took the distraction to pin him with a glare. He was still trying to figure out what Fedorian was trying to say without words when the Primarch, cleared his throat, beckoning silence, and continued.

"How did you find the human colony?"

"We were on the fringes of the binary system, dumping our static charge and preparing to move on when a small scout ship exited FTL a few thousand kilometres from the Eclipse. We disabled then boarded the vessel. We took the command crew alive and began cracking the computers aboard the ship. Most of the data was corrupted in the process but the information of the colony, which was relatively close by, was still somewhat useful. They managed to figure out where it was and we jumped heading for the colony. We stopped only once and engaged a large mining vessel that fled as soon as we opened fire on it. The rest you know."

There was another unbearably long pause before anyone spoke.

The silence was deafening.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. For your valuable insight into those events." The Primarch began. Adrien felt his stomach loosen, his muscles relax a bit, and his breathing return to normal. "But, there are still things we need to discuss about your actions and failure on the ground on the human colony."

Suddenly, he stopped breathing, his stomach dropped and his throat tightened.

## 17. Chapter 17

\*\*Earth, UEG Capitol Building, New York, URNA, October 27\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\*, 2561\*\*

The inside of his office was quiet apart from the news report from the video display on the wall. The reporter went on about the various affairs of the UEG and its colonies, detailing various reports about events happening throughout the colonies; any of the disasters, crimes, and celebrity gossip and sports events worth reporting about.

Chancellor Hewitt paid it no mind. The news channels hadn't yet been given the information he had just been given; the UEG had secured a treaty with the alliance of aliens forming the Citadel Council, of which the turians that had attacked Falkland, belonged.

While the diplomatic talks were still progressing, the main governing body of the Turian species, the Turian Hierarchy, had reluctantly agreed to pay reparations for the damages caused and for the loss of life. Then came in the reports from ONI about various atrocities committed by the Turians before and during the siege.

Adam Hewitt, UEG Chancellor, was reading some of the reports released by the Office of Naval Intelligence. Meredith, his second daughter, had also forwarded several reports regarding some of the Turian technology recovered from Falkland. The reports from ONI shed new light on what it had been like for the men and women on the ground, cut-off and outnumbered.

He felt another pang of regret and sadness for David.

His son was struggling with post-traumatic-stress-disorder, PTSD, and he was struggling to fit back into the fold of the Army. The new unit he had been placed in, hadn't served on Falkland and that seemed to be causing some friction between his son and the rest of his unit.

Adam felt \_so \_guilty. He might have been able to save David from some of that pain if he'd dedicated more time to being a better father and raising his children.

The intercom buzzed.

Adam was drawn out of the detailed reports and forced back into his office. He frowned. It was late and nearly everyone would have gone home. Who knew he was still here and why did they want him?

He buzzed through to let the person in.

It was David.

He had a renewed energy in his step and had a nervous smile plastered to his face. Adam let out a sigh of relief, smiled and turned off his COM pad. David probably didn't want to be reminded of those terrible days on Falkland.

"Dad," David said. He was still dressed in a set of standard issue army fatigues, suggesting that he had only just been let off base. He must have come straight here.

"David," Adam embraced his son with a tight hug. "How did you know I was here?"

"The guy at your front gate said you hadn't gone home yet." David said with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

Adam smiled and mentally slapped himself for not thinking of that.

"What brings you here?" Adam brought David into the office properly, offered him a seat, and a drink. He took both with surprising politeness. David had never been rude, but after Falkland he had been distant and withdrawn. This was a surprising, but not unwelcomed, change in attitude.

"I've been thinking," David began after taking a sip of the scotch Adam kept in the corner of his office. "About things. Like Falkland. What happened, and what I was going to do now. I still suffer from the nightmares and the flashbacks, but they're not as bad now. I was offered an honourable discharge and help in securing a civilian job again."

Adam listened to what his son was saying, trying to figure out where he was going. So far though, he had learnt nothing new. "So, are you going to take it?" Adam asked. David's smile actually grew wider.

"No. I've been talking to someone. Someone from Falkland. She was one of the people from the fight for the hospital. And I've decided to stay in the UNSC." Adam lifted his brow in curiosity. He also noted that David had said 'stay in the UNSC', not 'stay in the army'. An interesting choice of words. There were plenty of jobs available within the UNSC.

"I was even offered a couple of placements with ONI. But, I've decided, along with one of the guys I served with, to put in a transfer to the ODSs. I found out today my application was accepted." Adam was shocked into silence.

ODSs went with the fighting. The average life expectancy of an ODS was drastically shorter than that of someone working for ONI. Adam managed to keep a straight face only thanks to practice from dealing with politicians and journalists on a near daily basis.

"Oh," Adam eventually said, after what felt like an eternity of silence. "I admit, that is a surprise. But, if you're happy about it then so am I. you know there is no guarantee that both of you will make it through, right?"

David frowned, but nodded. "Of course. But if we made it through Falkland together, we'll make it through ODS selection together." He had rarely heard David speak with such conviction. "Plus, with the new peace treaty with the aliens, ODSs will be needed out there to keep the peace."

How did he know about that? Very few people in the UEG and UNSC knew of the peace treaty yet. It was a surprise that David did.

"As long as you're sure. ODSs are going to be on the forefront of every engagement between the UNSC and any of these new aliens and even on the home front, to keep the peace when the news breaks."

"I'm sure. More sure of this, than anything." David said, full of conviction and confidence. Adam fully believed him. It was good to see the spark in David's eyes burning with passion and desire again.

"Okay," Adam held up his arms in a mocking display of surrender. "Now, how about we make sure you can hold your liquor like an ODS, hmm?"

**\*\*Five Years Later\*\***

**\*\*2032 Hours, (Local Time), December 24\*\*\*\*th\*\*\*\*, 2565\*\***

**\*\*Quezon, Reach Military Complex, Epsilon Eridani System \*\***

David Campbell looked out of the living room window of his apartment. He could see the hustle and bustle of the Quezon Mall and highway. It wasn't the best apartment in town but it was still home to him. And Vanessa. And their daughter, nearly a year old and ready to celebrate



her first holiday.

He held Helena in his arms as he gazed down at the busy city below. She was asleep, resting her head in the crook of his neck, and Vanessa was on the COM to her parents in the small study he had set up. He was thinking of how he had gotten to this point in his life; married and with a daughter that he wouldn't trade for the world. It was strange to think that when he had met Vanessa he had been fighting for his life on Falkland. She had quite literally saved his life.

It had taken nearly two years after those fateful days, and plenty of contact with her, for him to realise that he had fallen in love with her. He also found out that love wasn't like it was in the movies or novels. It wasâ€¦ difficult to describe. In a rather clichÃ© sort of way, it was something he just knew, deep down somewhere in his heart. That moment where he realised that his life just wouldn't be the same without her. He needed her in his life. Not at every moment of the day, but to come back to after a particularly hard deployment. To listen to him when he shared his fears and not to judge him for the occasional nightmares that haunted him. And he does the exact same for her.

He checked the message on his COM pad again and sighed. He was being recalled to base tomorrow morning. The situation on New Leipzig was worsening and the UNSC was being called in to put an end to the problem.

The door to the study opened and Vanessa stepped out dressed in a loose t-shirt emblazoned with the ODST patch and motto: 'Feet First into Hell'. She smiled when she saw him with Helena but then frowned when she saw the expression on his face.

"You're being called back, aren't you?" she poised it as a question, but she already knew the answer.

"Yeah," David replied. "We're being called in to deal with the situation on New Leipzig. I don't know much more than that at the moment though." He didn't want to leave on a deployment that would take him to the other side of human occupied space for an unspecified amount of time. Not now that he had his daughter.

"Damn," Vanessa said under his breath. "I guess someone's got to do it. Are those birds getting involved?"

"I don't know yet. That'll depend on HIGHCOM, I guess. And the stupid alien council." Dave replied with a small shrug. He tried not to move too much, just in case he woke up Helena.

"Come on, let's get her to bed and make the most of this night."

David let her lead the way.

**\*\*1924 Hours (Local Time), January 3rd, 2566,\*\***

**\*\*UNSC Colony World; New Leipzig, Twelve Kilometres west of Jannermount City,\*\***

Rounds fired from the Batarian rifles tore away small chunks of rock

and debris, sending plumes of pulverised dust into the air, coating the dark coloured armour of the ODS'Ts pinned behind the low rock wall. Sergeant David Campbell bit out a curse and scrambled closer to the wall. Half of the company was spread out over a kilometre of desert terrain, near the town of Sanctuary Falls and access to the main highway into Jannermount City. The Batarian forces, supposedly nothing more than disgruntled pirates and freelancers- a claim by the Batarian government that David had his doubts about- had set up defensive positions outside the city and on the major highway in an effort to stop the coalition of UNSC and turian forces preparing to smash through their lines.

David and his ODS'Ts were trying to push into the fortified town of Sanctuary Falls, where they were to meet with the leading elements of the Turian forces pushing towards the highway. The Batarians were intent on keeping the town of Sanctuary Falls to themselves, and out of UNSC hands. If the UNSC took the town, they'd have a clear path into the city of Jannermount and there would be little the Batarians could do to halt the advance.

The town had been built near a large mining complex and several corporate buildings that were walled off and decorated with the logos of the various companies they represented. Including Lethbridge Industrial and Chalybs Defence Systems. They were major contractors for the UNSC and HIGHCOM didn't want the Batarians anywhere near the data in those facilities.

Captain Maya Yates, the Commanding Officer of Zulu Company, 7th Shock Troops Battalion, was a hundred metres to his right, kneeling in what used be the bottom of a small river, as tracer rounds landed in the rocks mere metres ahead of her. A tracer round ricocheted of a slab of stone and flew into the darkening sky of dusk.

Overhead, barely visible in the twilight sky, stars seemed to dart to-and-fro between constellations, swapping and exchanging while tiny gnats of light darted between the constellations in countless swarms: the battle in space was escalating quickly. Each shooting star was a missile or MAC round streaking through the vacuum and tearing chunks out of armour or destroying ships in city sized fireballs. Debris and wreckage twisted and burnt in the atmosphere in mile long streaks of fire that lit up the southern sky.

Chris Taylor, now in his mid-twenties and an ODS'T Corporal, peered over the crumbling rock and dirt being used for cover. His face was hidden behind a silver-blue faceplate that reflected the scene in front of him. He was trying to find the firing points of the Batarian machine guns that were hammering their position.

"There's one in the telecom tower!" Chris barked over the sound of the gunfire while ODS'T marksmen were unleashing pin-point accurate return fire with the large, S5 anti-material rifle- punching holes through the cinderblock walls the Batarians were using as cover. "And another in the house on the south corner- top floor!"

Taylor didn't need to shout, his voice clicked in over the radios built into the helmets, much louder than it needed to be. David let out a low growl as he watched one of the snipers, Mariano, get hit by machine gun fire raking his position. His cries of agony echoed over the COM link until one of the ODS'Ts near him turned it off.

"Where the hell is the Pilum?" David bellowed. A rocket streaked out from the outskirts of the town and impacted with a bone shaking explosion, some metres behind the forward ODST line, showering them with burning, white-hot shrapnel and bits of powdered rock.

"Callum's guys had it!" someone replied over the radio. "They got hit first, they're gone!" David didn't bother to even attempt to hold back a stream of curses. An entire squad down was bad. It was gutting for the ODSTs to lose their friends. It would be worse for their families back home.

"Do you have eyes on their last position?"

"A small wadi, twenty- thirty meters at your two o'clock." The same ODST replied.

The entire area had once been a wide open flood plain with several shallow rivers running through it, long before humans had ever settled here. Now the dried river beds provided a natural series of trenches and cover for the advancing ODSTs. One of the leading elements of the ODST force, led by Corporal Callum Featherly, had been torn apart while attempting to move between two adjacent wadis- the name given to the dried river beds.

They also happened to be carrying the M57 Pilum rocket launcher.

"Chris, Jameson, Kovsky- we're going for that launcher! Porter, have those buggers keep their heads down!" David barked orders over the secure COM link that allowed the ODST Company to keep in touch with one another. Captain Yates' voice burst through a slight hiss of static.

"Negative! You'll get torn apart! We've got Longswords en route. ETA is five mikes." The Captain ordered. Another spread of machine gunfire raked over the ODST lines. An ODST cried out as a round tore through her armour and body suit, ripping apart the flesh and bone beneath.

"We'd lose half the Company by then, Captain!" David replied. Without even waiting for her reply, he nodded at Chris and with a grunt of effort he hauled himself over the lip of the wadi he was in, and ran. He didn't stop to see if Chris and his fireteam had followed.

He held his M395B DMR in his right hand, close to his body, as he ran. A hailstorm of gunfire tore up the sand and rock around him, caking his black armour in fine coat of sun-bleached dust and powdered rock. He leapt over a narrow wadi and took a few leaping strides before rolling into the remains of Callum Featherly and his team.

Three black masses tumbled in after him with heavy grunts and cries of exhilaration. Chris had indeed followed him. David knew Captain Yates was going to chew him out later, after the fighting- if either of them survived that long- but he didn't care. He grabbed the M57 and placed the barrel on the edge of the wadi as a trio of bullets impacted the opposite side of the wadi, missing him by a hairs width. He lined up the smart-link scope with the support struts on the telecom tower, and fired. He adjusted his aim for the house Chris had

mentioned, and fired again.

The rockets screamed out and ignited the thrusters and blasted off towards their targets. The first impacted seconds later. A fireball expanded outwards from the base of the telecom tower, twisting beams of metal and melting joints apart. A screech of creaking metal giving way to gravity and mass brought the tower down as the second rocket hit its mark. The house was blown apart, sending brick and mortar, wood and slate up into the air before it came crashing down on dazed Batarians still trying to gather their wits after the explosion.

A cheer boomed across the COM lines. Then it went silent. There was still a battle to be won.

**\*\*1928 Hours (Local Time)\*\***

**\*\*UNSC Colony World, New Leipzig, Two Kilometres South of Sanctuary Falls,\*\***

**\*\*Turian 202\*\*\*\*nd\*\*\*\* Shock Battalion\*\***

Captain Adrien Victus, leading a Company of the Hierarchy's best shock troops, ran. Machine gun and sniper fire peppered the ground beneath his feet as he sprinted across the open ground. He bit back a curse as his kinetic barriers popped in a surge of energy. Static fizzed across his Heads-up-Display.

He bit back another curse. One not aimed at the Batarians responsible for killing several of his men, but aimed at his superiors, and the humans. He was only here, his men were only here- dying and killing- because of them. Humans had, in the last six years, levied themselves into a considerable position of power. They weren't the dominant race, or the most powerful, but when they spoke, the Council listened. The Council, was scared of them. And the humans knew it.

After the initial cease fire was agreed upon, the Council had tried to get the main Human government, the Unified Earth Governments, to join the Council as a member state- with all of the restrictions that entailed. Humans refused. The treaty of Farxien meant the humans would have to limit their dreadnought sized ships to one fifth of the Hierarchy's numbers. That meant, to the Humans, they would lose nearly all of their larger warships. The Council's stand on AI development was another issue and caused so much controversy, they were still hearing about it today. And then there was the technology.

The UEG and their military body, the UNSC, had access to technology the likes of which the Council had never even dreamed of before. They had tried to force the Humans into handing over. They refused again. The Asari Republics were the most vocal in their efforts to get humanity to join the council. In the end though the UEG had opted to stay out of the Council and for the most part, operates as a completely self-reliant entity.

That hadn't stopped them from attempting to trading civilian technologies and open dialogues with the various species. The most successful trading partner, ironically, was the Hierarchy. While the Asari was playing the long game, slowly gaining the political upper hand over the course of centuries and millennia- something they were

very good at due to their long life- the Hierarchy was impressed, and worried, by the military capability of the UNSC. The best way to remove the treat, the Hierarchy thought, was to make it a partner.

The Salarians were eager to learn about all the new sciences Humans brought to galaxy, such as the Slipspace drive- a device that is highly sought after in Council space. So far, the UEG was unwilling to share the technology with any of the other races. Even the small off shoot of the UEG, the NCA, refused.

When the Hierarchy became trade partners with the UNSC and UEG they also, after much debate and more than a bit of public backlash, agreed to a mutual defence pact. They were now, military partners as well. That was how Adrien, six years after storming the streets of the Human city, ended up on another human world, fighting with the humans, rather than against them.

New Leipzig was on the border of UNSC colonisation efforts in the Skyllian Verge, technically human occupied space, and it was within only a few dozen light years of the Batarian Hegemony, who saw Humanity as an affront to their way of life. Despite the Batarians pleas to the Council to remove the human presence from the Verge, the Council refused. They couldn't. Humanity had occupied this sector for well over a century before First contact. Entire generations had been born and raised here. Displacing them to appease the Hegemony would be unlawful.

That and the Council didn't have the power to remove the Humans even if they wanted to.

The Hegemony took matters into their own hands and hired a large fleet of pirates and mercenaries to launch an assault on Human occupied worlds in the Verge. New Leipzig was the where they made planet fall. Now the UNSC and the Hierarchy were attempting to remove them from the colony.

Adrien and his men were here, fighting the Batarians and hired mercenaries, to make sure the Hierarchy never had to fight humans in an open conflict again.

More bullets smashed into the ground around him as he moved forward again. He was trying to get his Company into the south side of the small human town that gave access to a major highway to the city. So far they had made it to the outskirts of an abandoned building project, surrounded by metal wire fences and brightly coloured plastic containers. Part of his Company was pinned down in a vehicle workshop some hundred metres down the road while another part was moving through a collection of houses. A tall telecommunications tower near the north end of the town was lancing out small arms fire at Turian and Human forces as they moved into positions surrounding the town.

"Sir," one of Adrien's subordinates radioed in. "That tower is keeping us pinned in the outskirts."

"I know that!" Adrien said. He was about to order someone to take out the support struts when a rocket screamed out from the UNSC lines in the north and careened into the tower. The structure buckled and twisted and eventually collapsed. Smoke poured into the twilight sky

as a tonne of dirt and sand was thrown into the air, creating a thick cloud of sandy fog nearly too thick to see through properly.

The enemy fire raining down on their position slackened, and then stopped. He took a moment to gather his breath, and his wits.  
"Where's Dartis and his men?"

"Pinned by sniper fire in a vehicle workshop. They're using the fog for cover to make their move."

"And Felmius?"

"Clearing a housing estate to the west." Someone replied. Adrien nodded as the information came in.

"Good. Have Felmius clear the estate and move towards the town centre. Tell Dartis to move and take the Mall." Adrien ordered. His subordinates relayed the messages. "We're moving towards the bridge in the centre of town."

They moved from the construction site and went through the streets leading into the centre of the small town. Most of the buildings were single or two stories with flashing neon signs that advertised what they were. Adrien didn't know how to read any of the human languages to see the familiarity between this small town and any other town or city back in Citadel space. Much like how the Human city on Falkland reminded him of a Turian city.

They headed down a narrow street which split into two separate roads and was divided by a small office building. The glass walls had shattered and was hastily replaced with sandbags and a random collection of solid materials to form some sort of barrier.

He signalled for his men to stop and stay in cover. He had bad feeling in his stomach. He was proved right a moment later as a hail of gunfire tore up the street near his most forward units. He ordered them to fall back as machine gun fire rippled against their kinetic barriers, flashes of blue and white shimmered against their bodies as tracer rounds flared off against them.

"Through there, that shop window!" Adrien barked out over the COM line as asphalt and concrete bloomed into the air around them. They were pinned with next to no cover. If he didn't get his men out of there quickly, they would all die. To him, that was unacceptable.

A Private was the first through the broken glass, landing inside with a crack of glass and broken displays. His men pushed through the empty store until they were all safely inside. '\_No,\_' Adrien thought. '\_We're anything but safe.'\_ They were still deep inside a combat zone and the Batarians were dug in far deeper than originally thought.

"Try and find a back way out of here," Adrien ordered, sending a squad out for the task. Judging from the size of the building, it wouldn't take them long. He took the moment of almost peace to get his breath back. He hadn't been this challenged since Falkland. He didn't like it.

He was probably only here, in this mess, because of his participation in those events.

His squad returned, breaking him away from that train of thought. He was grateful they returned so quickly. "Sir, we've found a back entrance that leads to an alleyway, we should be able to move around that Batarian gun position." The Corporal reported.

"Then let's go," Adrien motioned for his men to move quickly. They did. Within minutes they were inside the building at the junction and in the tight corridors and small rooms of the office.

The fighting inside was short, quick and was over in minutes. Clearing a building, room to room, was a blur of motion, short bursts of gunfire and cries of agony from their fallen foes. As they moved between rooms, covering each other with practiced ease, Adrien grimaced.

He hated close quarters fighting. He always had done, but after the tunnels beneath San Carlos, he hated it even more. Every thud of a grenade going off brought him back to that moment where he lost his entire squad -to the choking and blood and charred bodies of his friends.

When they cleared the building and his men gave a final 'all clear' he let out a sigh of relief. They could now push onto the centre of town where they were to meet the forward elements of the human forces. The galaxy-wide infamous ODSs. They were the human equivalent to his own outfit. And they were, he hated to admit, just as good and fearsome, as his own troop.

As they stood over the still bleeding corpses of the machine gun nest, a mixture of Batarian, Turian and Vorcha blood stained his boots. A small whine of engines could be heard in the distance. Then it became a roar. A trio of human fighter craft blasted through the skies above Sanctuary Falls. They released a wave of explosives that ripped through the town, turning entire blocks into smouldering rubble. The shockwave flowed through the streets and over the buildings and shattered windows and store fronts and nearly knocked Adrien off his feet.

"Dartis, Felmius, status?" Adrien radioed his men. Worried that the humans might have taken out some of his men in that wall of fire, smoke and shattered buildings.

"\_The Mall is clear, Captain. We're moving towards the town centre now." \_Dartis reported in first, gunfire and shouting could be heard in the background. A surge of static washed over the COM line as the Lieutenant spoke.

Felmius was silent.

It took two more attempts to raise him in the radio and when he finally answered, he could be heard coughing and the cries of his men could also be heard. Adrien's heart sunk.

"\_We're okay. A little toasted but okay. That was too close. The damn humans nearly killed us as well as that damn holdout." \_Adrien's heart lifted again. His men were still okay. He'd be putting in some serious words with his CO when they returned to base, however. The humans had been too liberal with their bombing and had nearly taken out an allied unit.

"Understood, Lieutenant. We'll rendezvous at the bridge as planned."  
Adrien replied, happy to hear his Lieutenant alive.

Felmius agreed and the line went dead. Adrien carried on with his mission, through the streets, past abandoned cars and through a hail of gunfire that claimed the lives of one of his men.

**\*\*2038 Hours (Local Time)\*\***

**\*\*UNSC Colony World, New Leipzig,\*\***

**\*\*Sanctuary Falls\*\***

David leant against the wall of a broken store front, a hundred metres from the bridge in the centre of the town. His armour was pitted and scarred from the close quarters fighting and he had stuffed one of the kinetic barrier emitters onto his belt and shoved a new battery into the hold. He had his men do the same.

A flight of Longswords had cleared out the southernmost part of town and turned it into a crater of smouldering rubble and charred bodies and the ODSs had cleared out a series of mortar and machine gun pits as well as a series of heavy artillery positions that could turn an entire armoured column into slag.

"\_Sergeant!" \_Captain Yates' voice bellowed over the COM line.  
\_"Position?"\_

"By the bridge, about to clear another enemy position before meeting with the Turians." David replied. Chris and Kovsky were on the other side of the street, taking pot-shots at the Batarians dug in the junction leading to the bridge. Jameson was kneeling down next to him, his SAW barking out a vicious series of tracer and AP rounds with staccato of light and tongues of flame licking out of the barrel.

"\_Copy that. We're two blocks west of you and we'll try to meet up as soon as we can."\_ The Captain switched off her COM and David focused back on the fight, here and now. He leant out of cover and aimed down the scope of his DMR, lining it up with the armoured torso of an officer issuing orders to his men. He pulled the trigger. A barrier flashed blue and silver, stopping the bullets from harming the four eyed bastard. He pulled the trigger again and again as the officer dove for cover. His barriers flashed until they popped with a shower of sparks and arcs of energy. By the time the officer was out of sight David had emptied half of his weapons magazine into him, broken through the armour and turned his insides to pulp.

'\_The only good Batarian was a dead one'\_ David thought. Ever since the UEG and UNSC had become known to the galaxy as a whole the Batarians had been blaming humanity for nearly every disaster and tragedy to befall their people. David was no fool, he knew ONI was probably responsible for more than one of the incidents in Batarian space but the Batarian hatred for humanity was more than just inter-species rivalry- it was a fear that each other was a threat to their way of living.

The Batarians were scared that the UNSC would incite a rebellion within the Hegemony- a fear that might not be totally unfounded- to



usurp the Hegemony and its power base. And the UNSC was worried that the Hegemony would launch an assault on human occupied systems in an attempt to subjugate them. Within a year of first contact the UNSC and Hegemony were in a state of Cold War.

"Jameson, make them keep their heads down! Kovsky, Chris; move up into the left flank!" David ordered. David pulled out a grenade from his webbing and threw it into the enemy lines, the resulting explosion allowed his team to move up closer to the enemy position and flank it. Once they got in relatively close to the Batarians, they made short work of them. The pirates and mercenaries were no match for the highly trained ODSTs. The bloody aftermath of the fight proved it.

David switched his COM channel to a line reserved for use by UNSC and Hierarchy troops on the field. He had no idea when the Turians would reach their side of the bridge. He radioed the Turian officer.

"This is Sergeant David Campbell, ODST Seventh Shock Battalion to the Commanding Officer of the Hierarchy forward infantry." David didn't bother with any real formality. He respected command structures and understood that, technically this officer was his superior but he had no respect for any Turian. Especially ones that had been on Falkland.

It took a moment for the Turian commander to respond. \_"Sergeant, this is Captain Victus, Two Hundred and Second Shock Battalion. I assume you've made the rendezvous ahead of schedule?"\_ David checked his watch. They were early.

"Yeah, we did. We're on the other side of the Bridge, holding down this side. What's your ETA?" David was sure that Captain Yates should be the one to meet with the Turian but right now he was the ranking ODST there. It would be him.

"\_We're just quarter mile from it. We'll be with you in a couple of minutes." \_The COM line shut off.

"Come on, let's go make sure those four eyed freaks don't give our new buddy a too hard a time." David led his team across the wide, slightly humped crossing and cleared out an ambush point that was being set up. When the Turians arrived they looked battered and worn. Much like his own ODSTs.

He met with the Turian Captain in the junction in front of the bridge, on the Turian side. It was a subtle hint that the ODSTs had done their job better than the Turians. The notion wasn't lost on Captain Victus.

"Captain Victus?" David asked, holding out his hand to the leading Turian. He had removed his helmet, allowing the Turian to see his dirtied and bloodied face. The fighting for the ODSTs had not been easy. It was never easy for ODSTs. As Captain Victus grasped David's hand, Kovsky took a picture from the side. It went unnoticed by the two leaders.

That picture taken by Kovsky would be immortalised for the ages. It symbolised two very different people, from two very different species working together, for the greater good. It showed two battered soldiers, two ordinary men, after heavy fighting, being able to shake

hands and act civil in the middle of a warzone. It also, in time, would popularise the idea of the UNSC and Turian Hierarchy working together to solve military problems throughout the galaxy.

"Hey, Chris?" Kovsky said as David and Victus talked. "What's the plan now?"

Chris shook his head. "Don't know. We'll find out when Captain Yates catches up and finishes ripping Dave a new one for that stunt outside of town."

"If you knew she was going to beat us all why'd you follow him?" Kovsky asked. He hadn't really thought of it at the time. He'd been with David and Chris since he became an ODS1 a year ago. He knew the team well enough but he was still the new guy in the squad. This was the first real deployment they'd been on together.

"I'd follow David into Hell if he asked me to. Back on Falkland he dragged my sorry ass through the tunnels under the city, through the data core for the city's AI and up to the street because I'd gone and gotten my stupid ass shot. He didn't leave me behind. He wouldn't leave me behind. I'd trust him over any officer." Chris said it like it was nothing. Like it was so obvious to anyone who bothered to look. To Kovsky though, it meant something he couldn't have learnt during basic, or the rigorous ODS1 training; it meant that your friends, the ones you risk your lives with, meant more than anything.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>It's funny really. That picture I took of Sergeant Campbell shaking hands with that Turian officer, I mean. I never intended it to become a galaxy famous picture that people think symbolises unity between races because Sergeant Campbell didn't believe it could happen. He hated Turians. Not to the same racist extreme as some people. He could work with them but he didn't like them. Especially at that time. He was still hurting from Falkland I guess." <em>\_\*\*â€œAndre Kovsky on the picture he took in Sanctuary Falls, 2565, during an interview with Sarah Hopkin in 2588.\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>So I know it's been a while but... another chapter! See? It's not dead. Neither am I. Life had just been really busy, you know? With work, Halo 5 (Totally awesome in my opinion), Fallout 4, Christmas (Which means even more work for me) and me working on a promotion at work (Even more work) and other stuff. But, the biggest problem for me now, is where to go with it. I know how the story ends. I've known since I started writing this. The problem is the middle stuff - the filling, if you will.<strong>

\*\*But I'm working out some ideas, fleshing them out and seeing how it works before I post anything. (Hence a reason it's taking a while to upload) This chapter went through so many different variations I've lost count of how many times I re-wrote it. But, it's here now. And you've probably read it now. So I hope you liked it. Let me know what you thought. No criticism means no improvement. So... criticise or something.\*\*

## 18. Chapter 18

**\*\*UNSC Colony World, New Leipzig\*\***

**\*\*Sanctuary Falls, 2132 Hours\*\***

David sat atop the roof of a vehicle repair shop, its owner having been captured or relocate by the invading pirates and mercenaries hired by the Batarian Hegemony. From the roof top he could see dozens of pelican dropships and medium sized transporters brought down the equipment and manpower needed to launch an offensive into the city. Four black silhouettes blocked out the light from the stars overhead, instead replacing it with the titanium underbellies of \_Charon\_-class frigates assigned to supporting the ground offensive.

The battle in space had been won with little difficulty.

"Hey, Boss man," Kovsky called up to the roof from the street. He'd gotten out of the heavy black armour and body suit and was wearing a set of simple camouflaged fatigues. He'd recently shaven. Looking over the edge and down on his teammate, David sometimes forgot that Kovsky was barely considered an adult on some colonies. He'd celebrated his twenty-first birthday in Slipspace, en route to New Leipzig. "The Dragon Lady wants to see you in the command centre."

"Right, okay," David hurried down into the shop, round a stack of worn tires and past several cars in various states of repair. Kovsky was waiting for him, his hands resting on his hips while he tapped his boot against the sidewalk. He checked his watch. "Any idea what she wants?"

"Nah," said Kovsky. "Just that she wanted you there ASAP." They moved through the streets side by side, passing dozens of marines and sappers getting ready for the coming days.

"Where's Chris and Jameson?"

"Chris is on the COM. Jameson is in the barracks with most of the other guys." Kovsky said. When they arrived outside the command tent David brushed off any specks of dirt on his fatigues, smoothed out any creases and took a deep breath. The two MPs didn't even look at him after he showed his ID.

"I'll see you in the barracks, Kovsky."

"Sure thing, Boss." Kovsky disappeared into the darkened streets leaving David to face the Captain and any other command staff by himself.

Inside he was greeted by a half dozen officers surrounding a display of the city, discussing various strategic options. He immediately noticed a tall man with greying hair and three stars in his uniform. Lieutenant General Heino Stockton didn't even bother looking up at him. None the less David performed the proper salute and stood rigidly at attention. Captain Yates, nicknamed the 'Dragon Lady' by the men, eventually called him to ease. There was also an unmistakable black uniform belonging to an ONI officer, hidden away at the far end.

"Sergeant," Yates greeted with a formal nod. She was still angry with him, there was no doubt, because he had ignored her orders during the assault on the outskirts of Sanctuary Falls. But she also displayed a modicum of respect for him. General Stockton finally looked up at him through narrowed eyes.

"Sergeant Campbell," Stockton said. He had the type of voice that sounded like he belonged in a high school classroom. Drab and monotone the General's voice didn't exactly install confidence. "I've heard good things from your CO." Stockton motioned towards Captain Yates with a flick of his wrinkled chin.

"Sir?" David didn't know what to say. He had never had to deal with a General in charge of leading an expeditionary force. Or any General for that matter. He certainly wasn't expecting to get praised. A couple of the other officers sized him up, obviously having heard the same 'good things'. The ONI officer weaselled her way into the front of the crowd. She was an unreadable mask, doing nothing except look unimpressed. From what experience he had with ONI, all their officers looked unimpressed.

"You've got the right type of character for a soldier. Strong, reliable and dedicated. I need someone like that right now," Stockton said. David had his doubts about what the General was saying. David lost his will to fight every time the galaxy's problems took him a star systems at a time away from Vanessa and Helena.

"What the General is trying to say," The ONI spook said, interrupting the General. She received a vicious scowl from Stockton and Captain Yates but neither of them said anything. "Is that we need someone to lead a strike team into outskirts of Jannermount and secure a central data chip from the Misriah Armoury Lab. ONI doesn't want a bunch of pirates and mercenaries getting their hands on that data."

"Right, and you're our man for the task, Sergeant." Stockton said. David nodded in understanding. Despite the fact that he had no clue as to why they had chosen him.

"I would have preferred someone with more experience, though." The spook said. She looked him over with icy eyes, an unhappy curl of her lip signified her dislike of him already. Captain Yates was taller than the spook by several inches and she didn't hesitate to square up to her.

"You wanted the best ODST I've got," the Captain growled, poking a finger into the other woman's chest. "He's it. He's reckless and can't follow simple orders, but he'll get a job done. No matter what." Yates was defending him, albeit with backhanded comments.

"Yes, Ma'am. You give the word and I'll have my men on the road within the hour." David said. General Stockton nodded at him.

"Get moving, son. Word is the Batarians are getting ready for a counter attack. If you're not back here by then, you'll be stuck behind enemy lines."

"Understood. We'll be in and out before they even notice us."

After being dismissed David made a beeline for the barracks, where

his team would be. The ODSST barracks had been set up in the hollowed out remains of a hardware store. Brushing past the shattered door he was met with ODSSTs enjoying some recreational time out in the field. Music blasted through a set of speakers someone had set up while a dozen ODSSTs gathered around an empty munitions trunk being used as a cards table. Chips and credits were scattered over the surface while the ODSSTs playing the game blasted jokes, comments and stories at each other.

"Listen up!" David barked as loud as he could. The ODSSTs snapped to with practised precision and ease. The music and banter stopped within a second. "Lima-Two and Four, pack up your gear. We're leaving in twenty minutes. Head to the motor pool, I'll have a ride waiting for us." He didn't stop to see if they followed his orders. They would do as they were told without question.

He left to get his own gear in order. He tried to ignore the growing sense of doubt about the mission and the unease the seeped into every fibre of his being. Too much didn't make sense to him and he felt like a puppet on strings, completely unaware of the grand plan being orchestrated by people behind closed doors. He hated it. He truly despised it.

He reached the motor pool, fully kitted out and ready before any of the others. They were taking three M12 Warthogs- older models of FAVs used by the UNSC. They were faster than a Foxhound but had less armour. For their planned mission the Warthog was the better option.

"Hey, Dave!" Chris called out from across the motor pools expansive vehicle bay. Behind him the rest of his team and Lima-Four followed. They were all kitted up and ready less than fifteen minutes after he told them. "What's the job?"

"I'll tell you en route," David replied. He ushered the two teams- now one- into the Warthogs and climbed into the passenger side of the middle vehicle. As they drove out of the town and onto the desert plains David began to explain the plan.

He was a little relieved to hear that he wasn't the only one having concerns with the mission. "If ONI wanted this data so bad why didn't they send a team in before launching an assault on Sanctuary? Why are we going in now? When the damn four eyed buggers know we're here?" Chris grumbled over the COMs. He wasn't the only one voicing his disparagement with how it was being planned out by the Brass.

"Enough! It is what it is. We'll go in, grab the data chip and be out before the Batarians even know we robbed it from under their flappy, gross noses." David snarled. The bitching stopped. The rest of the drive was completed in near silence.

They avoided the roads and main tracks- instead driving over the desert plains and rocky mesas to avoid detection. The powerful headlights and fog lights were switched off, forcing the ODSST drivers to use their VISR suites and imagery from overhead STARS to navigate.

The Misriah Labs were four kilometres from the city, right on outskirts where the empty desert became lightly developed

infrastructure. The three vehicle convoy stopped a kilometre away from the labs and the ODSs proceeded on foot. The last thing David wanted was to draw attention to themselves.

The labs were surrounded by a wall twice David's own height and the only way in that wouldn't cause a loud enough explosion to draw in every enemy soldier for kilometres, was the main gate. Written in proud gold letters on the left of the gate was the name given to the labs: **\*\*Mirbat Laboratory.\*\***

"Kealy, take your men and scoot right. Clear the buildings on the south side. It looks like they set up a COMs array over there. We'll go in and clear the main building. Chances are what we're looking for will be in there." David ordered.

While Kealy took his men along the right wall David steered his team towards the glass exterior of the main building. Lights saturated the inner courtyard, revealing four Batarian troops huddled together near a portable heater. To their left was an antiquated field gun dating back to the Rainforest Wars. "Fix your silencers." David whispered into the COM. The suppressors allowed the team to fire in near silence. It wasn't completely silent, but it worked well enough.

"Don't fire just yet, keep to the shadows and keep moving."

They moved into the lab without being seen. David took point through the narrow passages and hallways as they moved through the building. As he rounded a corner, heading towards the stairwell, he came face-to-face with a helmetless Batarian. The alien was muttering something to himself and when he saw the black armoured figures he barely got out a surprised curse. David let his rifle fall onto its sling and bull rushed the alien. His knife silenced the Batarian permanently.

"Damn that was close," Chris said, drawing a nod of agreement from Jameson.

"Agreed. Now let's keep moving before his friends show up." David replied as he wiped away the blood from his knife. "Kealy, how's it going on your end?"

"\_Fine, we've taken out the perimeter guard and are about to take the COM post."\_ Kealy reported, all formal and short.

"Copy that." They took the stairs up to the top level, where he was sure the central data core would be. In the lobby at the top of the stairs a half dozen mercenaries on guard duty lazily kept themselves busy. They obviously weren't expecting something to happen here anytime soon. Several of them were talking; discussing the points of fighting the obviously much more powerful UNSC and Hierarchy. They were talking about leaving or surrendering, arguing which was the better option.

"It won't matter if they surrender," Jameson said. "They'll end up getting shot either way." David knew all too well what the UNSC would do to the mercenaries after a trial. If they were found guilty of any crime they'd end up in front of a firing squad. They were the lucky ones.

Before David or his team could do anything a small explosion could be heard. It came from the south end, near the COM station. It was followed by staccato of gunfire from non-UNSC rifles.

"\_Shit the bastards saw us! We've got the COM array but they might have gotten word out." \_Kealy spat out a string of curses as more gunfire could be heard. The mercenaries in the lobby grabbed their weapons and made a bee-line for the elevators.

"Take them!" David ordered. The team swept the room- high and low- felling the relatively poorly equipped mercenaries. As they pushed forward, through a broken glass wall separating the lobby and central lab, he clicked his COM.

"Kealy, fall back and grab the Warthogs! We'll want to make a quick getaway!"

"\_Copy, we'll make a move for them now." \_David trusted them to get the job done.

They scoured the lab, looking for the data chip. The problem was it was the size of a playing card. It could have been anywhere. The terminal it was meant to be slotted into was empty. The mercenaries had been trying to crack into the computers with little luck. The would-be hackers were hiding in an office overlooking the inner courtyard. Despite their pleas for mercy, throwing their hands up to show they were unarmed, David wasn't feeling inclined.

"Take 'em." David ordered, raising his DMR.

"Dave?" Chris questioned. He was the only one that didn't bring his weapon to bear. David didn't hesitate and neither did Kovsky. The two ODSs made short work of them.

They searched the office. The data chip had been hidden in a small compartment inside a blown open safe. Apparently the mercenaries hadn't bothered to look properly while scouring the place.

"We've got the chip and are heading back down now. What's the situation on the Warthogs?" David asked. From the office he saw a half dozen set of headlights heading towards the main gate.

The battle for Mirbat was about to begin.

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>They're a no-go, Campbell. We've got enemy reinforcements coming down the road!" <em>Kealy cried out in frustration. The mission was going downhill, fast. He needed to regain some sort of control if they wanted to survive the night.

"Fall back into the building and head up to the roof. We'll fight from the high ground!" David ordered.

"\_That field gun might be old but should still work, we could use that to thin out there numbers!" \_Kealy replied. It was a good idea, as long as there was ammo for it and a crew to man it.

"I'll go and get thing working," Jameson offered. If anyone could, it would be him. But he also had the SAW, a weapon that would

desperately be needed on the rooftop.

"Fine but swap with Kovsky, you won't be needing the LMG down there." David said. Kovsky handed over his M20 SMG and took on the much larger SAW. After that they split up. Jameson rushed to the old field gun, which had been left in working order by the Misriah technicians. There was only a dozen or so shells for it in a neat pile designed to impress any visitors.

Kealy and his team burst onto the roof top as the first vehicle smashed through the main gates. Jameson fired the field gun. Despite being centuries out of date it performed brilliantly. The vehicle went up in a ball of flames- a mercenary fell out the back, screaming as he was burnt alive in his armour. The rest of the vehicles pulled up out of view, behind the secure walls of Mirbat Labs.

"Command this is Lima-Two!" David screamed into his COM as small arms fire erupted from the gateway. A shoulder fired rocket screamed out of the darkness and missed the main building. "We've been compromised! We've got the data but are cut off from our Warthogs and are under assault from enemy infantry! Requesting immediate support, over!" Jameson fired the gun again at the gate- the screams of fallen enemies broke through the report of gunfire. How Jameson was manning that gun by himself, David didn't know, it was damn lucky he was though.

Kovsky set up the SAW and opened fire with a practised set of short, controlled bursts that would have made their drill instructors happy. Another rocket screamed out of the darkness and this time it impacted the building: sending up a shower of permacrete and glass and shrapnel over the rooftop defenders.

"\_Copy that, Sergeant." \_The ops handler said in a voice so cool and calm he knew the bastard was planted in a nice cosy chair well away from a battlefield. \_"We've got a Commando team being re-routed to your position. Hold tight, Sergeant." \_

David bit back a string of curses and continued to fire his DMR at the shadowy figures. Even with the help from his VISR suite it was difficult to make out the enemy infantry. He could see more vehicles approaching, surrounded by swarms of foot mobiles.

Jameson fired the gun again while Desai started taking shots with her SRS. The fighting grew more hectic as more and more enemy infantry poured in towards the gate and the ODSs. The sheer numbers allowed them to push into the courtyard while mortars started raining down on their position.

Without help the ODSs were doomed.

The battle around Mirbat Labs reached its peak as the entire night sky was lit up as rockets and mortars were fired and detonated in mighty displays of fire and shrapnel. Tracer rounds criss-crossed the area in a spectacularly deadly light show of burning metal.

The battle went on for some time. David lost track in the dizzying chaos of the fight. The only thing he knew for certain was where his team was and how they were doing. The entire Lab complex was lit up by the crisscrossing flashes of tracer rounds and flashes of mortars as they detonated in attempt to kill the ODSs.



"Hold it together, troopers! Evac will be here soon!" David called over the COM in an attempt to keep the ODSs fighting. They didn't need much encouragement.

"Damn it, Dave, where the hell are all these bastards coming from?" Chris asked as bullets pulverised the wall behind him.

"I don't know! Just keep shooting!"

The small shield generators David had picked up in Sanctuary Falls had saved his life a dozen times already and continued to do so as more rounds flickered against the faint transparent bubble of energy. But against the torrent of enemy fire they began to fail, one by one.

Then the ODSs began to fall. One by one.

The gun Jameson had been using had kept the enemy forces at some distance and was punching holes through the enemy lines until it fell silent. An alert flashed on David's HUD that Jameson was injured. They fell back off the roof as the mortars grew more and more accurate.

The ODSs spread throughout the complex and courtyard, taking positions that allowed them to rain down hell on the mercenaries pushing closer and closer to the front doors of the Lab. David leapt down from the first story window, landed with a roll and, firing as he ran, moved towards where Jameson lay.

He was covered in his own blood, seeping from a dozen wounds and through his shattered armour. He was propped up against a bullet ridden, burnt out husk of a car a dozen metres from the gun, firing his sidearm at any mercenary stupid enough to move into the heavily lit parts of the courtyard.

"Come on, kid!" David grunted as he skidded to a halt next to Jameson. He grabbed the Biofoam out of his belt and quickly applied it to his wounded friend. He ignored Jameson's cries of agony as the Biofoam expanded in the wounds, sealing them. It was painful, but necessary.

Once Jameson stopped bleeding and the Biofoam settled, less than a minute after David shoved it into bullet wounds, he grabbed Jameson's collar and dragged him back towards the cover of the lobby. He didn't notice Chris and Kovsky move into positions to cover him.

Someone popped a smoke grenade in between the beleaguered ODSs and the dwindling number of mercenaries. Tracer rounds flared up in the smoke- creating demonic swirls of gas and fire that spread over the blood soaked, corpse covered courtyard.

David had nearly run out of ammunition when the shooting stopped. An eerie silence fell over the complex as the mercenaries decided whatever it was the ODSs had, wasn't worth the cost in life. They didn't have the same dedication or drive as any UNSC soldier. Let alone the ODSs who were renowned for their audaciousness and tenacity.

As the smoke began to clear and the bullets stopped flying the sound

of agonising cries penetrated the air. He looked at his roster- three BIOS readings had flat lined. Desai, Bray and Svenn had lost their lives. The rest of them were all injured.

"Grab their tags and ammo," David called out, pointing to their fallen comrades. "Chris, police the area and silence those damn mercs. If they wanted bloody mercy they shouldn't have taken the damn job."

Chris quickly closed the gap between them.

"Daveâ€¦ their non-combatants now. That would be war crime." Chris took off his helmet, revealing his sweaty face. He didn't want this conversation on record. David removed his own helmet.

"Chris, if they wanted mercy they should never have taken a job to invade a UNSC colony. They knew what they were signing up for and you know damn well they would do the exact same to us."

"I fucking know that! Damn it, Dave. We need to be the better people here. That's the whole point of having a Law of War."

"They're mercenaries!" David shouted. He could feel his temper boiling over as his cheeks began to burn. "They're not lawful combatants! If we arrested them and put them in front of a tribunal they'd be found as unlawful combatants and shot anyway! At least this way we're ending their suffering now, rather than dragging it out over the course of months." He turned away and began surveying the area, looking for anymore threats.

Chris grabbed his shoulder and forcefully turned him around. "At least that way it would be legal. If you want them all dead now, you can do it yourself. I'd go to hell for you Dave, but not because I committed a fucking war crime." Chris stormed off, securing any weapons he came across. His boots left distinct marks in the blood.

David growled as he shoved past a battered looking Kovsky and moved towards the few mercenaries still alive. He un-holstered his sidearm and pointed it at the wounded Batarian. The alien snarled at him and began to say something before David pulled the trigger. He splattered the Batarians brains all over the asphalt.

He did again and again to any mercenary still making a noise. The last one was a human. A middle aged man with a wild beard. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth and into the thick bush of hair on his chin.

"Please," the man coughed up blood as David approached. "Please, don't. I surrender!"

"You should have thought of that before you took part in this." David spread his arms to amplify his words. "You took an unlawful job and now you're paying the price. My friends have died here. More died back at Sanctuary and more will die when we assault Jannermount. If the roles were reversed you wouldn't grant any one of us mercy!" David finished off with a swift, brutal kick to the man's stomach. Then he levelled his sidearm at the man's face. He began sobbing, pleading for his life. David hesitated, his hand shaking. The crackling of the dozen or so fires reminded him of all the men that

had died so far. It steeled his conviction. He fired.

It was a scene that would haunt his dreams for decades, he was sure, but he felt no regret. No remorse.

As he moved back to the remains of his team he grabbed his helmet from where he discarded it after his conversation with Chris. As he sealed it over his head the unmistakable roar of several Warthogs approached.

The massive four-wheel drive trucks bounced over the corpses and crashed through the broken gates. A bulky, battle scarred APC followed them in. They skidded to a halt metres from the injured remains of the ODS team.

The driver of the first Warthog hopped out and left the weary troopers in awe. Over seven foot tall and covered in a hefty suit of green and grey armour that made the ODS battle dress look like papier-mâché.

"Lima-Two? Blue Team is here to extract you back to base. What happened to the enemy contact?" The lead figure spoke with a voice that inspired a calm confidence in everyone.

"You just drove over them." David deadpanned. He was tired and angry and all he wanted to do was to get off New Leipzig.

"Understood. Where's the rest of your team?"

"Dead. Give us a hand with the bodies, would ya?"

The armoured man moved too fluidly, too naturally to be a robot as did the two others that helped with the bodies and seriously wounded. The ODSs sat in the back of the APC on the way back to base, mostly in silence. Kovsky kept Jameson talking as they crossed the desert.

One of the armoured figures sat with them, helping with the first aid.

"Hey, what unit are you guys from?" Kovsky asked.

"That's classified, marine." Came a surprisingly female voice. She had a distinct accent, similar to Kovsky's own.

"Yeah, but you got have a name for your unit, right? One that isn't classified. Blue Team doesn't count. I've come across a dozen of those in the UNSC already."

She hesitated a moment. She was completely silent. Completely still. David guessed she was talking to someone higher up in their unit. Eventually she nodded.

"We're Spartans."

End  
file.